



# State-Funded Fictions: The NEA and the Making of American Literature After 1965

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State-Funded Fictions: The NEA and the Making of American Literature After 1965

A dissertation presented

by

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to

The Department of English

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for the degree of

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State-Funded Fictions: The NEA and the Making of American Literature After 1965

**Abstract**

This dissertation studies the effects of a patronage institution, the National Endowment for the Arts Literature Program, on American literary production in the postwar era. Though American writers had long cultivated informal relationships with government patrons, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) reflected a new investment in the aesthetic life of the nation. By awarding grants to citizens without independent resources for work yet to be produced, it changed both the demographics of authorship and the idea of the “professional” writer. The grants also generated new themes for fiction as well as new civic roles for writers themselves.

The central argument of “State-Funded Fictions” is literary-historical: state funding resulted in the development of what I call the *compromise aesthetic*: fiction that combines realism and experimentalism in order to appeal to readers across the educational (and political) spectrum. This is the resolution of a set of dynamic tensions inherent in welfare state liberalism and enacted by writers involved in the agency’s initiatives. Ralph Ellison, a public servant and an architect of the NEA Literature Program, championed the artist’s individual freedom as a way of advancing the collective good. Tillie Olsen advocated for a more democratic literary world with more accessible resources, but her rhetoric and writing preserved the ideas of meritocracy and literary excellence. Raymond Carver and the writers of minimalist short fiction—Bobbie Ann Mason among them—produced fiction that navigated between populism and elitism in an increasingly polarized political climate. Contemporary writers achieve a different kind of

compromise, both aesthetically and politically, in realist fiction that acknowledges critiques of state power without suggesting revolutionary action. Taken together, the literary products of federal patronage attest to the intimate relationship between aesthetics and politics in the twentieth century and beyond.

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## Introduction

In the summer of 1965, one year after President Lyndon B. Johnson promised to build a “Great Society,” a group of artists and writers convened in Tarrytown, New York to talk about how the United States government could best support the arts. It was an accomplished group. Those present included composers Duke Ellington and Leonard Bernstein, actors Gregory Peck and Sidney Poitier, and writers Paul Engle and Ralph Ellison. These were the charter members of the National Council on the Arts, a group appointed by President Johnson, and they were asked to plan a formal state patronage program. Together, they developed recommendations for the establishment of two new federal agencies: the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEA and NEH). Once granted congressional approval, the Endowments would support artists and scholars, respectively, by awarding grants to institutions and to individuals; the grants were provided, in one current administrator’s words, “no strings attached.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, the agencies would not mandate the production of any specific form of art or scholarship. For the first time in the nation’s history, the government would support the artist without asking for anything in return.

This dissertation will argue that this moment in American political history reshaped American literary history. The Literature Program of the National Endowment for the Arts, a quintessential social-democratic institution, intervened in the production, circulation, and reception of the fiction and poetry of the United States. The NEA Literature Program sent public funds to people and institutions involved in every aspect of the literary world: literary magazines,

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Stoll, “The NEA Literature Fellowships Turn Forty: An Introduction,” *NEA Literature Fellowships: Forty Years of Supporting American Writers* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts Office of Communications, 2006), 4.

publishing houses, artists' colonies, secondary schools, universities, and, of course, individual writers. From 1967 onward, the NEA awarded Creative Writing Fellowships, which were granted to individual writers of fiction and poetry; these grants are at the center of this study. The awards were symbolic as well as economic. Like the Higher Education Act of 1965 (Public-Law 89-329), Public-Law 89-209—the law that established the two endowments—was part of an effort to create a more just, equitable, and, indeed, greater society for all American citizens. As he signed Public-Law 89-209, Johnson described the relationship between the arts and democratic society: “Art is a nation’s most precious heritage, for it is in our works of art that we reveal to ourselves, and to others, the inner vision which guides us as a nation. [...] The arts and humanities belong to the people, for it is, after all, the people who created them.”<sup>2</sup> Johnson’s effort in this speech to bridge the gap between artists and their audiences reflected tensions inherent in welfare state liberalism: between populism and elitism, between democracy and meritocracy, between the collective good and individual freedom. These same tensions would be embedded in the NEA’s agenda and would be embodied by writers involved with the agency over the next fifty years.

The effects of this ubiquitous literary institution are many and varied, but this project will examine the three most significant and demonstrable. The first is social: the NEA Literature Program changed the demographics of authorship in the second-half of the twentieth century. In conjunction with the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (commonly known as the G. I. Bill) and the aforementioned Higher Education Act of 1965, the NEA Literature Program ensured that more citizens had access to literature. The Program did this not only by funding literary education programs (such as the Poets-in-Schools Program, discussed below) but also by

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<sup>2</sup> Qtd. in Fannie Taylor and Anthony L. Barresi, *The Arts at a New Frontier: The National Endowment for the Arts* (New York: Plenum Press, 1984), 40, 49.

seeking out politically and economically marginalized citizens and funding them disproportionately. As a result, women and working-class citizens were empowered to produce literature, sometimes to the chagrin of the literary establishment.

The second effect is thematic: the NEA troubled prior definitions of creative work, rendering the concept ambiguous and unstable, and the fiction that writers produced reflected this instability. In an earlier era, writing was seen as antithetical to work or, in a later historical moment, as professional work.<sup>3</sup> During the 1930s, the heyday of the Popular Front, writing was seen as labor like any other, akin to farming or factory work. With the advent of the foundation era, however, the relationship between writing, work, and compensation became increasingly muddled. From 1965 onward, writers received grants from both public and private institutions that allowed them to *stop* working, or, as some would have it, to *start* their real work. Rarely was their award contingent on producing any given literary product, nor on selling that product in the literary marketplace. But grant was not a salary, either, and if the writer was a professional, this identity was the result not of money but prestige. Writers, especially writers who worked in other capacities, thematized their changing relationship to work in their fiction. *State-Funded Fictions* shows not only how the work of writing changed but also how writers changed their representations of work.

The last notable effect of the NEA Literature Program is formal: it helps explain the resurgence of realism towards the end of the twentieth century. This is a development noted by

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<sup>3</sup> On nineteenth-century literary professionalism, see Christopher P. Wilson, *The Labor of Words: Literary Professionalism in the Progressive Era* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985). This subject will be discussed more fully in Chapter Four.





Americans, it funded work that would appeal to the majority of readers, thus bringing a reinvigorated form of literary realism to a position of prominence. Taken together, these changes show the profound effect of state funding on American literary production and reception both.

Despite its influence on postwar literature, the NEA has been almost entirely neglected by literary historians. This is surprising given the current state of the field. In the last quarter century, but especially in the past ten years, the study of post-45 American literature has taken a turn for the political—more specifically, the political-institutional.<sup>7</sup> Scholars working in this period have examined some of the political institutions of American governance, including the presidency and the Democratic Party.<sup>8</sup> Thus far, though, much of this work argues for a metaphoric relationship between postwar writers and the government, or it analyzes how writers represent political life in their fiction and poetry. It does not always attend to the historical

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<sup>7</sup> Some, though not all, of this politically-oriented literary criticism overlaps with the new literary sociology of the last decade. Following Pierre Bourdieu and John Guillory, this work examines how literary institutions—prize committees, publishing houses, and universities—construct literary value. Representative examples include Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), James English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), and the essays in “New Literary Sociologies,” the special issue of *New Literary History: New Sociologies of Literature* 41, no. 2 (2010). See also Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (New York: Routledge, 1986) and Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). My work aligns itself with the new literary sociology in terms of institutional interest, but it departs from the strict Bourdieuan version of it in the attention paid to the strange, contingent routes of individual actors. In this, my method owes something to Bruno Latour’s actor-network-theory. See Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> On the presidency in postwar literature, see Sean McCann, *A Pinnacle of Feeling: American Literature and Presidential Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). On the Democratic Party, see Michael Szalay, *Hip Figures: A Literary History of the Democratic Party* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012). Szalay describes briefly the genesis of the NEA Literature Program, but whereas he focuses on the convergence of political and literary-critical discourses at the moment of the agency’s founding, I trace the effect of the NEA on American literary history in the decades following the agency’s establishment. See Szalay, 72-78.

interactions between writers and elected officials, nor does it recognize how these writers often served as public servants themselves.<sup>9</sup> When scholars do take a more historical approach to the question of American literature and the postwar state, they often focus on how writers were commissioned to carry out the foreign policy programs of the United States. Much of the scholarship on Cold War arts and letters portrays writers as the (often unwitting) pawns of foreign policy, or it suggests that their art is adulterated by the state programs that promoted and sustained them.<sup>10</sup> (Deborah Cohn's work on "Inter-American" relations during the Cold War represents an important exception.<sup>11</sup>) But what my research has shown is that state patronage has mixed and unpredictable results. When the American government did try to co-opt writers, by funding their travels or publications, these same writers managed to turn this funding towards their own purposes. Some, like the former Young Communist Tillie Olsen, even used this money to support further political agitation (see Chapter Two). This is not to say that radical literature always received federal support—it certainly did not—but it is to say that state-funded fiction often eludes state control.

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<sup>9</sup> One scholar who has carefully attended to the way writers assumed roles within political institutions—or, more accurately, within para-political institutions—is Merve Emre. See her work on the dissemination of American culture through the American Express: "Ironie Institutions: Counterculture Fictions and the American Express Company," *American Literature* 87, no.1 (2015): 107-136.

<sup>10</sup> The scholarship on the cultural Cold War is vast and growing. The following books and articles have been especially instructive for this project, even though they often describe artists involved in Cold War *kulturkampf* as subjected to state power: David Caute, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy During the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), Robert Genter, "The Cold War Culture of Containment Revisited," *American Literary History* 26, no.3 (2014): 616-626, Serge Guilbault, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), and Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: The New Press, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> Deborah Cohn, *The Latin American Literary Boom and U.S. Nationalism during the Cold War* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2012).

Furthermore, my research into the NEA shows how enabling, even emancipatory, government aid was for American citizens who were eager to make art and who were without the means to do so. The NEA recognized that writing requires resources—namely, time, money, and education—and that few citizens enjoyed the economic privilege that allowed for the production of fiction or poetry. The grant program was designed to rectify this cultural expression of economic inequality. The result was a more democratic literary world and, arguably, a more excellent literary canon.

#### PRIOR MODELS OF STATE PATRONAGE: A COMPARATIVE OVERVIEW

The National Endowment for the Arts was not the first example of government arts patronage in America, but its precedents provided very different models of state support. While the nineteenth century saw various alliances between writers and municipal agencies (we might think, for example, of the “Custom-House” section of Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*), it was not until the twentieth century that the federal government began to support artists and writers in a sustained way. The Works Progress Administration’s (WPA) Writers’ Project, established in 1935, was a New Deal initiative designed to give over 6,600 “unemployed” writers guaranteed income during economically depressed years, a time when few people were buying food let alone books. Under Henry Alsberg, the Project employed over ten thousand writers during an eight-year period; the list of employees included Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, and Richard Wright.<sup>12</sup> These writers, essentially federal employees, received fixed

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<sup>12</sup> For more on Ellison and the WPA, see Chapter One. The NEA, though, is quite different from this model of state patronage, which simply gave writers jobs. Granville Hicks, the editor of the *New Masses* and a key literary figure from this period, described the difference between the WPA and the NEA most clearly. Referring to former government employees like Hawthorne and Howells, he said, “All these men were at least supposed to work for their money, and so were the

salaries as compensation for their participation in projects such as *The American Guide Series*. The work they produced was not sold for profit but rather distributed to private presses. As Michael Szalay has demonstrated, the salaries provided by the government via the WPA radically altered the idea of the “professional writer” by privileging the process of writing over the product. The fate of an art object in the marketplace was immaterial; put simply, “the only thing that separated the amateur from the professional artist was a wage itself.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, this first incidence of state patronage initiated a discussion about literature, the literary marketplace, and the concept of artistic professionalism, a discussion that evolved over the course of the twentieth century.

Whereas the New Deal patronage initiatives were public knowledge, the state patronage projects that followed were sometimes covert—or at least, complicated—operations. The Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), a branch of the CIA, influenced many developments in cultural life, particularly in Western Europe, in the aftermath of the Second World War. The CCF, founded in 1950, picked up on the general turn away from communism amongst artists and intellectuals and formed alliances with artists like Arthur Koestler and Stephen Spender, who helped the United States efforts in international *kulturkampf*. The effects of the CCF were pervasive. As Frances Stonor Saunders writes in *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters*, “[at] its peak, the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF) had offices in thirty-five countries, employed dozens of personnel, published over twenty prestige magazines, held art

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beneficiaries of the Federal Writers’ Project when that came along in the Thirties. The National Endowment for the Arts, however, was established to give money away.” Granville Hicks, “The Best of the Small,” *SR*, June 29, 1968, RG 288, Records of the National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Szalay, *New Deal Modernism: American Literature and the Invention of the Welfare State* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 69. Szalay’s book lays the historical foundation for my project.

exhibitions, owned a news and features service, organized high-profile international conferences, and rewarded musicians and artists with prizes and public performances.”<sup>14</sup> The CCF influenced the Anglo-American literary community by funding publications like the *Partisan Review*, formerly funded by the John Reed Club, and *Encounter*, a publication started by the CCF in 1953. Both examples demonstrate the CCF’s dedication to funding the anti-Stalinist left in the United States and in Europe.<sup>15</sup> In this moment, the government provided support for writers by funding floundering literary publications rather than the struggling writers themselves. By choosing such a method of support, the U.S. government could emphasize the autonomy and ideological freedom of the writers they indirectly supported and simultaneously condemn the model of support—construed as control—that the Soviet Union deployed. This opposition speaks to the difference between the respective political ideologies of the WPA and the CCF: if in the first instance, the government, in Szalay’s words, “stepped in and transformed laissez-faire into New Deal welfare capitalism,” in the second, the government could disavow intervention and claim to let markets and tastes run in whatever directions they would.<sup>16</sup>

The NEA, like the CCF, presented the government patron not as an employer but as a benefactor. However, in this instance the government would not play creative director; instead, it promised to cede all control. The nature of the Creative Writing Fellowships suggested that the government would leave writers entirely alone. Writers on government grants did not have to work a fixed number of hours or produce particular kinds of literature—or, really, any literature

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<sup>14</sup> Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War*, 1. See also Caute, *The Dancer Defects*, chapter 19, “Passports for Painting: Abstract Expressionism and the CIA,” 538-567.

<sup>15</sup> On CIA funding for the *Partisan Review*, see Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War*, 162-164; on *Encounter*, see Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War*, 165-189.

<sup>16</sup> Szalay, *New Deal Modernism*, 59.

at all. The grants were awarded on the basis of a proposal that outlined future projects, but no writer would face repercussions if she failed to execute her plans. What was important was that the state recognize literary potential and support it in a way that freed the writer from other, competing obligations, like working day jobs or caring for children. In the words of Carolyn Kizer, the Literature Program's first director, writers would simply use the grants to "buy time."<sup>17</sup>

The grant program was not simply a way to deliver money to deserving individuals, however; it was also a way to reshape literary production according to the ideology of the welfare state. In an internal memo to NEA chairman Roger Stevens, Kizer outlined the plan for grants: out of the \$153,000 earmarked for the support of fiction and poetry, \$37,000 would go to young and unknown writers.<sup>18</sup> Grant winners with dependents would receive more money than those without. This stipulation was crucial for women writers, who were often tasked with childcare and domestic work.<sup>19</sup> The agency also committed itself to regional diversity as well as to racial and gender balance, though it did not always achieve the latter. Based on these stipulations, we can see that the grant program was not purely merit-based, nor was it need-blind. It intended to correct historic injustices, and it aimed to transform the conditions under which talented citizens lived and worked.

At the same time, the NEA promised to fund and to promote the most excellent writing, which was, according to NEA administrators, a public good. Time and again in the documents of the agency, administrators emphasize that they are supporting the most talented writers, whether

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<sup>17</sup> Qtd. in David Demspey, "Endowing the Arts," *SR*, August 12, 1967, RG 288, RNEA, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

<sup>18</sup> Kizer to Stevens, October 19, 1967, RG 288, RNEA, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

<sup>19</sup> For the relation between gender and the grant program, see Chapter Two.

by funding the “little magazines” in which these writers first publish, or by awarding writers grants for lifetime achievement.<sup>20</sup> Bernard Malamud, one of the judges who awarded the first slew of Creative Writing Fellowships, put the point most succinctly in a letter to Chairman Stevens: “The point is to get the best.”<sup>21</sup>

Getting the “best” also meant putting America in the best position internationally. One of the motivating factors for the founding of the NEA was the winning of international admiration, first for the production of excellent art and, second, for liberal tolerance (or at least for the appearance of tolerance). The NEA was thus of a piece with other cultural diplomacy efforts from the Cold War era. For John F. Kennedy, improving and diversifying the domestic arts scene was one way to compete with the cultural production of the Soviet Union. An overview of his plans for the arts demonstrates how conflict abroad necessitated investment in the arts at home.

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<sup>20</sup> The NEA supported the “little magazines” through the *American Literary Anthology*, discussed in Chapter One, and through a \$50,000 renewable grant to the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines. Carolyn Kizer explained the need to support these literary journals: “Support for America’s literary magazines is a natural and important way of helping American writers and writing. Literary magazines have been the natural habitat of the American writer, particularly in the early stages of his career. Writers practice their craft and find their place in the culture through the medium of literary magazines. In most cases it is the small magazines which discover the new talents, and given them their first showcase and their first substantial recognition. What might be called the continuity of our literary and intellectual culture, both in its traditional and its dissenting forms, is sustained by these magazines” (Carolyn Kizer to Roger Stevens, July 6, 1967, RNEA, National Archives II, College Park, MD. In 1980, the NEA Literature Program ran a brief pilot program in Senior Fellowships, which were “to support and honor creative writers and other literary professionals who have received the highest critical acclaim but who are not widely known outside the literary field itself.” Untitled memo, RG 288, RNEA, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

<sup>21</sup> Bernard Malamud to Roger Stevens, August 25, 1966, RG 288, RNEA, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

## JFK AND A PREHISTORY OF THE NEA

January 20, 1961 was a day of many firsts for the United States. This date saw the inauguration of the first Catholic president, a man who was also the first president born in the twentieth century. The day's ceremony also marked the first time a poet would read at the inauguration, a tradition that has continued ever since. As the apocryphal story goes, Robert Frost intended to read a poem written specifically for the occasion, but, blinded by the light, chose to recite instead "The Gift Outright." The inclusion of an artist in the inauguration ceremony signaled a new era in American politics, one in which government openly acknowledged the importance of the arts and of the individual artist.

Kennedy invested in the arts in both symbolic and material ways. The audience on inauguration day included Robert Lowell, John Hersey, John Steinbeck, and Allen Tate as well as fifty other artists. White House dinners featuring musicians like Pablo Casals and Stravinsky followed. The Presidential Medal of Freedom represented yet another important gesture.<sup>22</sup> Most significantly, Kennedy planned to increase government financial sponsorship of the arts. To this end, he appointed editor and arts administrator August Heckscher to the position of Special Consultant and commissioned a study of the government's involvement in the arts in March of 1962, the findings of which were released in June of 1963. The study explains in part why recent "years have witnessed in the United States a rapidly developing interest in the arts," as well as the elevation of "the writer and the performer," who "hold new positions of respect in our

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<sup>22</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), 729-733.



society.”<sup>23</sup> Heckscher cites several reasons for this trend, including an “increasing amount of free time [...] a new sense of the importance of cities; a recognition that life is more than the acquisition of material goods” as well as, in a broader sense, “a growing awareness that the United States will be judged—and its place in history ultimately assessed—not alone by its military or economic power, but by the quality of its civilization” (5-6). Referring to the programs of the cultural Cold War, discussed above, Heckscher suggests that the “evident desirability of sending the best examples of America’s artistic achievement abroad has led to our looking within, to asking whether we have in fact cultivated deeply enough the fields of creativity” (6). The answer, it turns out, is no: “A long-standing weakness in what might be called the cultural infrastructure has led to institutions inadequately supported and managed and, as in the theatre, to a lack of stability and continuity which provide the grounds where talent can develop and mature” (Heckscher, 6). The solutions proposed all indicate increasing the government’s role as patron of the arts, by acquiring more art for national museums, commissioning public buildings and posters, and sponsoring arts events such as concerts and fairs. Other proposals include adjustments to tax law and changes to education policy. Taken together, these changes will fulfill the promise of the inauguration, a day that, as Heckscher describes, “was understandably hailed as signaling a new partnership in national life [...] [and that] marked the beginning of a new phrase in the history of art and government” (8).

For Kennedy, the arts were valuable not only because they were the markers of a nation’s prosperity, as Heckscher suggests, but also because they were symbols of a nation’s liberal tolerance. Kennedy best articulated his understanding of the role of the artist in America at a

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<sup>23</sup> August Heckscher, Special Consultant on the Arts “The Arts and the Government: A Report to the President” (Washington: U.S. Government Print Office, 1963), 5. Hereafter cited in text by page number.

small ceremony for the recently deceased Frost, held at Amherst College in October of 1963.

The theme throughout the speech is the value of artistic dissent. Kennedy begins by saying that one of the “deepest sources of our national strength” comes in the form of “men who question power,” which Frost did in his poetry.<sup>24</sup> “When power corrupts, poetry cleanses” (242), says Kennedy. In other words, art serves as a kind of check on state power. The artist and the statesman may disagree, but they are ultimately essential parts of the same system.

At the same time, Kennedy calls attention to the artist’s place *outside* society. “The artist,” he explains, “however faithful to his personal vision of reality, becomes the last champion of the individual mind and sensibility against an intrusive society and an officious state. The great artist is thus a solitary figure. [...] In pursuing his perceptions of reality, he must often sail against the currents of his time” (Kennedy, 242). This was a timeless vision of the artist-as-outsider but not quite a timely one; for the last decade or so, editors and public intellectuals had been remarking on the growing allegiance between the artist and the state and on the growing migration of the artist from margin to center.<sup>25</sup> But as Kennedy continues, we see that the centrality of the artist *depends* on his or her marginal position. The following passage explains this paradox:

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<sup>24</sup> John F. Kennedy, “President John F. Kennedy Pays Tribute to the Poet Robert Frost and All of America’s Writers and Artists,” in *In Our Own Words: Extraordinary Speeches of the American Century*, ed. Robert G. Torricelli and Andrew Carroll (New York: Kodansha International, 1999), 242. Hereafter cited in text by page number.

<sup>25</sup> This shift within the intellectual community was acknowledged at the time both by cultural commentators and, significantly, by the intellectuals themselves. The *Partisan Review*, an anti-Stalinist leftist publication, issued two special issues on “Our Country and Our Culture” in 1952. Similarly, in June of 1956, *Time* published a cover story on the “plight” of the American intellectual, and, taking Jacques Barzun as a representative example, suggested, “The Man of Protest has to some extent given way to the Man of Affirmation—and that happens to be the very role that the intellectual played when the nation was new.” “Our Country and Our Culture, Part II,” *Partisan Review*, July/August 1952, 420-450; “Education: Parnassus, Coast to Coast,” *Time*, June 11, 1956, 67-75.

If sometimes our great artists have been the most critical of our society, it is because their sensitivity and their concern for justice, which must motivate any true artist, makes him aware that our nation falls short of its highest potential. [...] If art is to nourish the roots of our culture, society must set the artist free to follow his vision wherever it takes him. We must never forget that art is not a form of propaganda; it is a form of truth. And as Mr. MacLeish once remarked of poets, there is nothing worse for our trade than to be in style. In free society art is not a weapon and it does not belong to the sphere of polemic and ideology. Artists are not the engineers of the soul. It may be different elsewhere, but democratic society—in it—the highest duty of the writer, the composer, the artist is to remain true to himself and let the chips fall where they may. In serving his vision of the truth, the artist best serves his nation. And the nation which disdains the mission of art invites the fate of Robert Frost’s hired man, the fate of having “nothing to look backward to with pride, and nothing to look forward to with hope.” (Kennedy, 243)

We see here the set of contradictory concerns that would shape federal arts policy for years to come. Kennedy must distinguish the kind of art produced in a “democracy” from the “propaganda” produced in undemocratic societies (the Soviet Union), and thus he goes to great lengths to praise the artist’s “freedom” and well as his or her commitment to self and commitment to “truth.” And yet these same commitments serve the interests of the nation and in fact help the nation achieve “its highest potential.” The artist must serve national interests if the government is to answer the clarion call with which Kennedy ends his speech: “I look forward to an America which will reward achievement in the arts as we reward achievement in business or statecraft” (243). Alluding here to the incipient program for financial support for the arts, Kennedy envisions a future alliance between the state and the artist that will nonetheless preserve the artist’s integrity and freedom. As we shall see, the complex relationship between individual freedom and the collective good outlined here would recur in discussions about federal arts funding in the decades to come.

## STATE-FUNDED FICTIONS

The conflict between individual freedom and the collective good is just one of the conflicts that characterized federal arts funding. In *State-Funded Fictions*, I focus on four representative writers involved with the NEA Literature Program, each of whom points up the conflicts and tensions of the fellowship program—and of the 1960s welfare state more generally—in instructive ways. With a few exceptions, the writers examined here are writers of fiction; this focus is reflected in the title. My study is limited to fiction because of the difference between the market for fiction and the market for poetry. As critics and journalists have lamented in recent years, the market for poetry is a small one; in 2011, Wendell Berry, author of that year's second-best-selling book of poetry, earned barely more than \$4,000 from his book sales.<sup>26</sup> Though the 1960s were a better decade for poetry—one thinks of the literary celebrity of confessional poets Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton—the possibility of making a living through book sales alone has always been more difficult for the poet than for the novelist. Patronage, then, has historically been necessary to sustain poetry in America.

For fiction writers, however, the market often seems like a more promising system of financial support. Thus, patronage is a more contentious idea for writers and readers of fiction. Just one month after the NEA's founding (but before the Creative Writing Fellowship Program was established), the novelist and critic David Dempsey wrote a critique of the foundations for a special *Harper's* issue on the "Writer's Life." Reflecting on the fact that there is now more "found money" than ever for writers, he questioned the value of this "supportive economics" for writers and readers both:

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<sup>26</sup> Rachel Friedman, "Livelihoods of the Poets," *New York Magazine*, December 11, 2011, <http://nymag.com/news/intelligencer/topic/poetry-2011-12/>.

For the serious creative writer, literary grantsmanship as it is practiced today represents a basic shift in attitude towards writing as a profession. Whatever may have been thought in the past about hardship as a necessary and annealing factor in the development of art has given way to joyful acceptance of foundation bounty. With so much money around for the asking, why shouldn't the writer get his share? Such a point of view has created a new commitment—not to the reading public, and certainly not to “success,” but to the juries and screening committees through whom grants are dispensed and reputations made. [...] In a curious way, foundations want their authors to become self-supporting, but at the same time they seldom select the kind of applicants who are likely to become “popular.” [...] Whether intentional or not, the effect of most grants has been to underwrite the commercially unsuccessful and, rightly or wrongly, to foster an elite kind of literature which appeals predominantly to the intellectual. This works only up to a point. Eventually, the support is withdrawn. Having learned to please the foundations, the writer may discover that he is able to interest the general reader only by “going back” on his art. The situation is simpler for poets, who are resigned to the non-profit-making nature of their work, but there is hardly a novelist in the land who does not share Norman Mailer's view that “a writer of novels never really considers himself a success until he has seen his name on the best-seller list.”<sup>27</sup>

Dempsey shared with Mailer the belief that the novelist, unlike the poet, is beholden to the “general reader,” and, more broadly, the “reading public,” both for his reputation and for his financial reward. Patronage, according to Dempsey, could impede aesthetic innovation as well as entertainment, as grant-hungry writers would strive to occupy a middle ground between entertainment and the avant-garde.

Despite Dempsey's foreboding, the NEA Literature Program and the grants it provided expanded in the decade that followed this essay. The critique of the state-funded fiction writer, however, did not disappear. Thirteen years later, John Updike, a prolific novelist and essayist, testified before Congress regarding arts funding. His words echo Dempsey's:

I would rather have as my patron a host of anonymous citizens digging into their own pockets for the price of a book or a magazine than a small body of enlightened and responsible men administering public funds. I would rather chance my personal vision of truth striking home here and there in the chaos of

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<sup>27</sup> David Dempsey, “The Foundations: A Welfare State for Writer?” “The Writer's Life,” a special issue, *Harper's*, October 1965, 167.

publication that exists than attempt to filter it through a few sets of official, honorable, public-spirited scruples. Rather than government subsidies to dictionary-makers and ballet companies, I would like to see the government reduce inflation so that these enterprised [*sic*] could again become self-supporting.<sup>28</sup>

Here, Updike anticipates the neoliberal turn (addressed more fully in Chapter Four and the conclusion) in arguing that the market should be left unregulated so that it might regulate the success and failure of various products, books among them. Updike also implies that there might be a difference between literature that would appeal to the “enlightened” and literature that would appeal to the penny-pinching members of the public. His testimony recalls the division between highbrow and lowbrow forms of literature—between avant-garde and kitsch, between elitism and populism—that was so prominent in the midcentury and that would reemerge during the NEA’s lean years.

In each of the chapters that follow, one or more of the dissertation’s central tensions is foregrounded. Each chapter focuses on a writer who was instrumental to the NEA’s formation, self-definition, or endurance as a patronage institution. In the first chapter, Ralph Ellison, a charter member of the National Council on the Arts and architect of the NEA Literature Program, positioned himself as the champion of individual freedom and artistic privacy in contradistinction to the good of one collectivity: African-Americans. Of course, this meant that he aligned himself with another idea of the common good: the national interest, as determined by elected officials. Ellison’s idea of himself as separate from one collectivity and aligned with another helps us better understand his essays and offers a new context for his novel *Invisible Man* (1952). In the second chapter, the central figure is Tillie Olsen, and the central tension is between democracy and meritocracy. Olsen, an inaugural winner of an NEA fellowship, was a

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<sup>28</sup> John Updike, testimony H. J. Res 629, January 30, 1978, The Collected Papers of Ralph Ellison, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

fierce defender of the rights of women and members of the working class, who, she argued, deserved the resources for making art. At the same time, though, she understood herself to be a great artist and sought out recognition for her artistic excellence. Her time at the Bunting Institute at Radcliffe College, a fellowship program for the most remarkable female writers and scholars (a program that, to some of its members, was never quite democratic enough), elucidates these contradictions as they coalesced around one iteration of the creative worker: the “professional” woman writer. The third chapter looks at creative work and literary professionalism from a different angle, through a study of the short fiction of Raymond Carver, a recipient of an NEA Discovery Grant, a grant for writers without economic advantages. The grant allowed Carver to complete his debut story collection, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976). The stories completed after the grant was awarded collapse the binary Carver establishes in his early fiction between work—working in a saw mill, or teaching school—and artistic craft. Carver’s debut collection heralded the return to realism, a development that would mark the 1980s and signal a turn towards a kind of literary populism. This movement in short fiction, called minimalism, is the subject of the fourth chapter. Carver’s brand of minimalism managed to achieve a kind of compromise between populism and elitism—its stylized quality marked it as aesthetically innovative—while second-generation minimalists like Bobbie Ann Mason edged closer towards a fictional form that would be accessible to the average American. The tension between populism and elitism resolves itself in the dissertation’s conclusion, where I explore recent trends in NEA grant winners and identify the prevalence of what I call the *compromise aesthetic*, a marriage of realism and experimentalism that is both critically acclaimed and eminently marketable.

The compromise aesthetic represents both compromise and conflict, literary as well as political. Similarly, the tensions described in the case studies above are not fixed binaries but shifting conceptual terrain. And so it is fitting that these studies begin with a figure who participated in different state patronage programs, in different roles, throughout the twentieth century, and who changed political course along the way: Ralph Ellison.



## Chapter One

### The Politics of State Patronage:

#### Ralph Ellison and the Founding of the NEA Literature Program

*Your art is not a political weapon. Yet much of what you do is profoundly political.*<sup>29</sup>

-President Lyndon B. Johnson, remarks at the White House Festival of the Arts, June 14, 1965

*I've been criticized because I was not political. Privately [...] my politics are my own! I'm not a spokesman. I'm not a politician. And I've very, very carefully tried to avoid pretending to be what I am not.*<sup>30</sup>

-Ralph Ellison to James Alan McPherson, 1970, emphasis original

The scandal began, fittingly, with a letter. It was the summer of 1965, and President Lyndon B. Johnson and his wife, Lady Bird, were organizing a White House Festival of the Arts, featuring readings and performances by midcentury poets, choreographers, and cultural critics. It had been a tumultuous year: the United States had grappled with the assassination of Malcolm X, the escalation of the war in Vietnam, and, most recently, the Watts riots. Amidst these major events, a minor squabble amongst artists might be easily overlooked, but this small-scale clash was intimately connected to the larger global conflicts. Robert Lowell, one of the most admired poets in America, initiated discord when he sent the Johnsons his regrets along with his objections to America's military presence in Vietnam. "I thought of such an occasion as a purely artistic flourish, even though every serious artist knows that he cannot enjoy public celebrations without making subtle public commitments," Lowell wrote to the President.<sup>31</sup> Lowell's glaring absence drew the attention of the press, and speakers at the festival—including Mark van Doren,

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<sup>29</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, "Remarks by the President White House Festival of the Arts," June 14, 1965, Part II, *The Collected Papers of Ralph Ellison*, The Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>30</sup> Ralph Ellison and James Alan McPherson, "Indivisible Man," in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), 387. Hereafter cited by page number.

<sup>31</sup> Robert Lowell to Lyndon B. Johnson, May 30, 1965, *The Letters of Robert Lowell*, ed. Saskia Hamilton (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 459.

John Hersey, and Phyllis McGinley—all alluded to Lowell’s actions. Dwight Macdonald even passed around a fairly tepid petition; as the *New York Times* reported, “the gist of it was that the presence of the signers should not be interpreted as repudiation of Mr. Lowell or as support of the President’s Vietnam policy.”<sup>32</sup> Ralph Ellison, one of the few writers who did support Johnson’s Vietnam policy, refused to sign. “It’s adolescent,” he said to a reporter for the *New York Post*, “he’s boring from within at the White House.”<sup>33</sup> The sniping among these artists and intellectuals signaled more than simple disagreement over foreign policy, however. Rather, these statements showcased competing visions about the role of the artist in the political sphere.

This discussion would intensify in the months following the disastrous White House festival, during which Congress debated passing a law that would allocate federal funds for artistic and cultural initiatives. Coming on the heels of an era in which “culture had become an American Cold War weapon,” the creation of the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities raised important questions about the relationship between politics and artistic and intellectual pursuits.<sup>34</sup> Economist Dick Netzer summarizes these concerns:

Few people connected with the arts have ever seen large-scale public subsidy as an unmixed blessing. In fact, prior to the 1960s, many of those most concerned feared that direct subsidy of any real dollar importance would come at the price of heavy political intervention in artistic decision-making, a cost that would exceed the benefits. There was apprehension about philistine legislators and elected officials straight out of H. L. Mencken’s gallery, who would seek to censor avant-

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<sup>32</sup> Howard Taubman, “White House Salutes Culture in America,” *New York Times*, June 15, 1965, 48.

<sup>33</sup> *New York Post*, June 15, 1965, 18.

<sup>34</sup> Michael Brenson, *Visionaries and Outcasts: The NEA, Congress, and the Place of the Visual Artist in America* (New York: The New Press, 2001), 1.

garde program choices, witch-hunt for obscenity and subversion, and generally favor the bland and mediocre over the exciting and distinguished.<sup>35</sup>

Netzer goes on to remark, “this sort of intervention has been a rarity” at the time of his writing, but this does not mean that political concerns disappeared. The early decades of the NEA saw discussion and debate about the artist’s role in political life and about the political value of apolitical art.

The establishment of the NEA and the ideology that animated it help us understand the strange trajectory of Ellison’s career, which took him from WPA employee to struggling writer to celebrated author to civil servant. This last phase of his career is perhaps the strangest and yet least examined. As we know, after the publication of *Invisible Man* (1952), Ellison never published another work of fiction during his life. (The essay collections *Shadow and Act* and *Going to the Territory*, published in 1964 and 1986 respectively, along with the *Three Days Before the Shooting*, published posthumously in 2010, constitute the rest of Ellison’s published work.) And yet Ellison remained in the public eye and continued to speak for and about African American writers. His visibility can partly be explained by the popularity of *Invisible Man* in secondary schools and in universities. For instance, by 1966, all freshmen at Stanford University had to read *Invisible Man*; it remains a staple of college literature courses today.<sup>36</sup> As John Guillory has argued, the university creates a canon of respected authors by replicating syllabi and

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<sup>35</sup> Dick Netzer: *The Subsidized Muse: Public Support for the Arts in the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 36.

<sup>36</sup> Arnold Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 415. The book is taught frequently in literature courses, including Bucknell’s English 386, “The Modern Novel” <http://www.facstaff.bucknell.edu/rickard/286syll.html>, CUNY’s ENG 3950, “1950s American Literature” <http://blsciblogs.baruch.cuny.edu/1950s/the-syllabus/>, and Harvard’s English 178x, “The 20<sup>th</sup> Century American Novel,” <http://english.fas.harvard.edu/course/english-178x-american-novel-dreiser-present/>.

curricula.<sup>37</sup> More recently, Mark McGurl has demonstrated how the presence of writers within universities—as students and as instructors—can account for various aspects of postwar literary production, including the segment of that production that he terms “high cultural pluralism,” of which we might consider Ellison a part.<sup>38</sup>

But there is another institution that also explains Ellison’s endurance as a literary figure despite his limited creative output. That institution is the National Council on the Arts (NCA), of which Ellison was a charter member. This council would go on to create the National Endowments for the Arts and for the Humanities, and Ellison would remain an advocate for the NEA, especially its Literature Program, throughout his life. Over the years, Ellison seemed to exchange the role of author for the roles of administrator, committee member, and public speaker. Taken together, we might consider these roles that of civil service, which was in some sense Ellison’s primary profession in his later years.

Like the role of instructor in the postwar creative writing program, the role of civil servant was a relatively new position for the artist. In prior decades, artists often deliberately positioned themselves as social outsiders and political dissidents, and politicians were content to let these troublesome artists fend for themselves. (The New Deal era represents a notable

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<sup>37</sup> See Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, vii and *passim*.

<sup>38</sup> See McGurl: *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of the Creative Writing Program*, 56-63. Though McGurl does not examine Ellison in detail, Ellison did hold teaching positions at both Bard College and New York University. See Rampersad, 359-380 and 469-519. Kenneth Warren offers a different explanation for *Invisible Man*’s endurance, suggesting that the novel remains relevant because the same problems that faced African Americans in the 1950s are still present: “Now, more than fifty years after its publication, *Invisible Man* is still around. And while it might be tempting to attribute the novel’s longevity to those things of permanent interest going on beneath the narrative’s surface, the foregoing pages have suggested that it is still too early to tell because unfortunately many issues that should long ago have faded away are very much with us.” Kenneth Warren, *So Black and So Blue: Ralph Ellison and the Occasion of Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 107.

exception to this policy, which Ellison once called one of “benign neglect.”<sup>39</sup>) But cultural and political climates were changing in the wake of the Second World War, and Ellison, the self-styled apolitical writer, was both an architect and beneficiary of the growing alliance between government and the arts. By 1967, Ellison found himself serving on a series of public and private committees: in addition to being an inaugural member of the National Council on the Arts, Ellison was in charge of awarding the National Institute’s William Dean Howells prize, a member of the Carnegie Corporation’s Commission on Educational Television, the director of the Associated Councils of the Arts (funded by the Rockefeller Foundation), the honorary consultant in American letters to the Library of Congress (where his papers are now held), one of five trustees for National Citizens Committee for Public Television, and, last but not least, a member of Johnson’s American Bicentennial Commission.<sup>40</sup> These positions inevitably demanded a lot of Ellison’s time—a study of Ellison’s personal papers shows how much time he and his wife Fanny spent scheduling the appearances required by all these different groups—and surely interfered with his creative writing. What I want to suggest in this chapter, though, is that Ellison’s public service explains more than just his failure to produce another complete work of fiction; it also illuminates aspects of his writing, including his essays and the ending of *Invisible Man*. Thus, the project of this chapter is twofold: first, to describe Ellison’s involvement in state politics and state patronage, and second, to contextualize his fiction and non-fiction in terms of his public service. I begin with a discussion of Ellison’s role in the NEA’s founding before

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<sup>39</sup> Ralph Ellison, untitled and undated draft of remarks on the NEA’s twentieth anniversary, Box I, The Ralph Ellison Papers, the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>40</sup> Ellison’s first appointment of this nature was his position on the Panel on Educational Research and Development, which met in February of 1963; Ellison and Arthur Miller were the only two creative writers present. Rampersad, 395, 419-432.

turning to some of the NEA's first initiatives. This study shows how Ellison's own belief in artistic freedom coincided with the initial agenda of the agency, which was to support the innovation of individual artists and to avoid seeming censorious. These same political principles can be located in Ellison's essays, many of which emphasize democracy, a central concern of the NEA. I then read the aesthetic goals of the agency back into *Invisible Man* and argue that the novel presents a case for a patronage program that will preserve the individual writer's freedom and independence.

#### FROM WPA TO THE NEA: ELLISON AS FEDERAL EMPLOYEE

Ellison is one of the few twentieth-century American writers who were involved with the patronage projects of the welfare state in both its 1930s and 1960s incarnation. His statements in support of each period's respective patronage program index his shifting political allegiances between the 1930s and the 1950s, a transition documented in detail by Barbara Foley.<sup>41</sup> During his years with the WPA's Federal Writers' Project, Ellison, then based in New York, wrote short anthropological and historical studies of the city and its environs, including "Short story of Negroes of New York on swimming as an amusement" and "Problems of early Negroes during English occupation etc."<sup>42</sup> When budgetary concerns threatened to eliminate the WPA Writers' Project, Ellison wrote a letter of support to Congress, arguing, "It has been plain to the progressive and socially conscious writers and artists of America that the Federal Arts projects have already made a significant contribution to the advance of culture as a democratic

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<sup>41</sup> See Barbara Foley, *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 2-10 and *passim*.

<sup>42</sup> Ralph Ellison, *The Collected Papers of Ralph Ellison*, The Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

manifestation in this country [...] the whole conception of what such a project might contribute to the peoples' artistic awakening and general awareness, has only recently begun to take serious, planned form.”<sup>43</sup> Unlike his commitment to the Writers' Project, Ellison's involvement with the state patronage from the Cold War era, the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), was short-lived and peripheral. In 1956, the CCF staged a conference on “Cultural Freedom in the Western Hemisphere” in Mexico City. U.S. delegates included the author John Dos Passos, the socialist Norman Thomas, and the founder of the ACLU, Roger Baldwin, and Ellison, who, in his own words, was “quite honored to be asked.”<sup>44</sup> At the time, Ellison, the winner of the Prix de Rome, was living and working at the American Academy in Rome. He was briefed by Nicolas Nabokov, Secretary General of the Congress for Cultural Freedom. He then traveled to Mexico City in September. Ellison, who held the value of “cultural freedom” quite close to him and believed that his country did as well, was appalled by the “Latin rhetoric” that opened the conference. He wrote to Fanny that it seemed to him that these Latin American writers expected the U.S. delegates to “to join them in blaming every evil in their countries on this country” but that he had refused.<sup>45</sup> He returned to Rome disenchanted and ever more committed to his country of origin. With his experiences as a WPA employee and as a Cold War cultural ambassador, Ellison was uniquely positioned to compare and contrast the different forms of state patronage: the first a salary for work regardless of its merit or market appeal, the second a travel stipend for those who would speak in support of the state.

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<sup>43</sup> Ralph Ellison, undated letter, Part I, Box I: 19, Ralph Ellison Papers, The Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>44</sup> Qtd. in Rampsersad, 331.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

By the early 1960s, a new form of state patronage was on the horizon. Kennedy had commissioned a study on better funding for the domestic arts, and though he would not live to see the realization of his ambitions for an improved American arts scene, his successor would continue his plans.<sup>46</sup> Johnson picked up where his predecessor had left off and made a concerted effort to bring artists into the political sphere, initially simply by bringing artists into the White House.<sup>47</sup> But the cultural climate had shifted since Kennedy's day, and invitations to the White House now inspired political protest. When asked about Lowell's action months later, Ellison replied:

When Lowell wrote to the President—and it was a skillfully written letter—he stated his motives of conscience, his fear that his presence would commit him to the President's foreign policy. In other words, he feared the potency of his own presence in such a setting, a potency which would seem to rest in his person rather than in the poetry for which we praise him and consider him great. But he didn't stop there, the letter got to the press, and once this happened, it became a political act, a political gesture. I think this was unfortunate. The President wasn't telling Lowell how to write his poetry, and I don't think he's in any position to tell the President how to run the government. [...] So it was not in itself a political occasion, and all of the hullabaloo was beside the point.<sup>48</sup>

Ellison erects a series of divisions here—separating the person from the poetry, private correspondence from the public press, the artist from the government—at the very moment that Johnson aimed to bring these things together.

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<sup>46</sup> Brenson suggests that Johnson hoped that by supporting the arts he could “gain some support from the East Coast liberal establishment that was opposed to his Vietnam policy” (1).

<sup>47</sup> In fact, Ellison had his “first taste of White House glamour,” as Rampersad puts it, “when he joined John F. Kennedy and several hundred other guests at a buffet reception to mark the centennial of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation” on February 12, 1963 (394).

<sup>48</sup> James Thompson, Lenox Raphael, Steve Cannon, “A Very Stern Discipline: An Interview with Ralph Ellison,” *Harper's*, March 1967, typescript in The Collected Papers of Ralph Ellison, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.



Throughout his career, and even as he became more and more involved in public service, Ellison would insist on the distinction between creative work and political action. He expressed this position most forcefully to James Alan McPherson: “I’ve been criticized because I was *not* political. Privately [...] my politics are my *own*! I’m *not* a spokesman. I’m *not* a politician. And I’ve very, very carefully tried to avoid pretending to be what I am not” (Ellison, *Essays*, 387, emphasis original). McPherson, for his part, saw Ellison in a slightly different light. He remarked that 1965 was the beginning of Ellison’s “institutionalization”: “When you get institutionalized [...] you become an extension of the institution and you are constantly called upon to justify yourself in those terms.”<sup>49</sup> Indeed, Ellison would become more and more involved with various public and private institutions from 1965 onward. “To radical blacks,” according to Ellison biographer Arnold Rampersad, “these were examples of a black man colluding with white power. But Ralph saw himself serving the American liberal tradition that he loved and revered.”<sup>50</sup>

In Ellison’s eyes, Johnson embodied that tradition more than anyone. If, for Ellison, the White House festival was “not in itself a political occasion,” Johnson suggested otherwise. In his remarks during the festival, Johnson praised American artists and American “freedom,” promised to use state funds in support of artists, and, most significantly, explained how he understood the relationship between art and politics: “Your art is not a political weapon. Yet much of what you do is profoundly political. For you seek out the common pleasures and visions, terrors and cruelties of man’s day on this planet. You help dissolve the barriers of hatred and ignorance which are the source of so much pain and danger. In this way you work toward

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<sup>49</sup> Qtd. in Rampersad, 425.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 414.

peace—not the peace which is simply the absence of war—but the peace which liberates man to reach for the finest fulfillment of his spirit.”<sup>51</sup> Ellison and Johnson seem to articulate diametrically opposed ideas about the artist’s role in the political sphere, the first insisting that artists were “not political,” the second admiring artists for their “profoundly political” contributions. Yet these beliefs are not as different as they appear. Both Ellison and Johnson believed that art contributed to democratic life, both at home and abroad. When Ellison objected, in this instance and elsewhere, to “political” action or to “ideological” art, he was criticizing political models that differed from democratic pluralism, such as socialism or black nationalism. He had a Cold War liberal’s distaste for the dogmatic. Both Johnson and Ellison believed that the artist, by making a unique contribution as an individual citizen, participated actively in a democratic society’s political life. The two men formed a strong alliance during Johnson’s presidency, and in the decades that followed, Ellison remained one of Johnson’s staunchest defenders.<sup>52</sup>

This bond grew stronger when Ellison assumed a formal role in service of the federal government. Along with the novelist Harper Lee and the poet Paul Engle, who also directed

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<sup>51</sup> Remarks by the President White House Festival of the Arts, 14 June 1965, Part II, Box II: 40, The Collected Papers of Ralph Ellison, The Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>52</sup> Ellison first offered Johnson public support in the aforementioned *Harper’s* interview, saying that the President was “far ahead of most of the intellectuals—especially those Northern liberals who have become, in the name of the highest motives, the new apologists for segregation.” Ellison expounded in an essay, “The Myth of the Flawed White Southerner,” defending himself as well as Johnson as he explained why, “as a charter member of the National Council on the Arts, I felt that governmental aid to the American arts and artists was of a more abiding importance than my hopes that the Vietnam war would be brought to a swift conclusion” (*Essays*, 558). Privately, Ellison thanked Johnson for appointing him to the Council and for making him aware of “certain capacities for constructive action” and a “latent dimension of myself.” Ralph Ellison to Lyndon B. Johnson, March 21, 1967, Part I, The Collected Papers of Ralph Ellison, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Iowa's Creative Writing Program, Ellison was one of three creative writers appointed to Johnson's National Council on the Arts. Johnson established the Council in September, and its members were announced on February 23, 1963. Senator Jacob Javits, a supporter of the arts under Kennedy and Johnson both and a friend of Ellison's, was likely partly responsible for Ellison's appointment.<sup>53</sup> Other notable committee members included Sidney Poitier and Gregory Peck, Duke Ellington, and the architect O'Neil Ford.<sup>54</sup> Roger Stevens, theater producer and founder of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, served as chair. The committee convened in Tarrytown, New York, and their first order of business was to develop recommendations for the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities, which were established on September 29, 1965 after being approved by Congress. The law stipulated that each endowment would, following Congress's approval, receive five million dollars over three fiscal years. It also outlined the kinds of initiatives that the endowments would fund; for the

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<sup>53</sup> Shortly after the news was released, Javits sent a telegram to Ellison congratulating him on the appointment: "Congratulations on your appointment to the National Council on the Arts. There is a great opportunity here for permanent service to the nation and its cultural life which will determine both the joys of living of our people and our place in history. This is at least partial realization of a national recognition of the arts for which I have been striving for 16 years, and I am delighted that you are a colleague in this endeavor. I hope you will call me when you come for the first meeting of the council, if not before. You will have the fullest cooperation of my office. With warm regards." Part I, *The Collected Papers of Ralph Ellison*, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>54</sup> The full list of appointees is as follows: Marian Anderson, Contralto; Albert Bush-Brown, architecture; Duke Ellington, musician; Paul Engle; O'Neil Ford, architecture; Lawrence Halprin, landscape architect; Ralph Philip Hanes; Huntington Hartford, financier and art patron; Helen Hayes, actress; Charlton Heston, Actor; Richard Howard Hunt, Sculptor; Ruth Carter Johnson; Harper Lee; Jimilu Mason, Sculptor; Robert Merrill, baritone; Gregory Peck; Sidney Poitier; Rudolph Serkin, musician; Oliver Smith, theater; George Stevens, director; Edward Villella, dancer. RNEA, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

NEA, these initiatives included theatrical productions and public art, while for the NEH, initiatives would usually come from individual scholars or from scholarly institutions.<sup>55</sup>

In the beginning, the NEA used its endowment to fund institutions and programs that were already up and running. Initial examples included the repertory theaters in New Orleans and Providence, the American Ballet Theatre, and the San Francisco Opera.<sup>56</sup> The NEA also developed some of its own institutions, such as the American Film Institute.<sup>57</sup> In almost every instance, the agency funded organizations instead of individuals by awarding grants to schools, museums, orchestras, and other arts organizations. By improving these institutions, it was surmised, both the audience and the artist would benefit.

This policy applied to literature as well. In addition to an annual anthology of the best American writing, discussed below, the Literature Program funded institutions like the American Academy of Poets, American P.E.N., and the Radcliffe Institute for Independent Study.<sup>58</sup> But as the poet Carolyn Kizer, who served as director of the Literary Programs from 1967-1970, acknowledged in an internal memo, “It is perhaps feasible to develop programs in the performing arts which are chiefly concerned with community and group projects [...] However, when it comes to art and literature, the role of the individual creator is paramount.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Taylor and Barresi, *The Arts at a New Frontier*, 40.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 80-88.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>58</sup> Carolyn Kizer, untitled memo, Part I, Box I: 90, The Collected Papers of Ralph Ellison, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. For more on Radcliffe, see Chapter Two.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

Though Ellison, in much of his writing, advocates for “the individual writer’s unique existence” (Ellison, *Essays*, 176), it was Engle, not Ellison, who insisted that the National Endowment for the Arts offer support to individual writers. In a series of letters from the summer of 1965, Engle presented his concerns about the neglected creative writer and solicited Ellison’s aid. “I am especially eager to have you here,” he wrote from Tarrytown in June, “not only to show you the beauties of the area, but also to discuss what we ought to do about the ‘creative artist.’ It is obvious that the Council is determined to give NO money at all to individual painters or writers, and all of it to vast schemes for giving orchestras an extra month of playing time. How many of us on the Council will protest that?”<sup>60</sup> Engle reiterated his concern the following month and asked Ellison to help him “advance a proposal from the individual artist” and [support](#) his recommendation to invite Saul Bellow and Robert Penn Warren to the September meeting. “If the Council doesn’t offer help to writers, why the hell are you and I on it?” he asked in frustration.<sup>61</sup> Though he worried about “seeming to be self-serving” in his requests to fund individual writers, Engle persisted, and by 1967, the NEA had put into place a program that would provide grants directly to writers.<sup>62</sup> In a memo to Stevens, Kizer outlined the grant program: out of the \$153,000 in grant money for fiction and poetry, \$37,000 would be awarded to young and unknown writers. The grants were designed to support works in progress, which

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<sup>60</sup> Paul Engle to Ralph Ellison, 30 June 1965, Part I, Box I, The Collected Papers of Ralph Ellison, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>61</sup> Paul Engle to Ralph Ellison, 9 July 1965, Part I, Box I, The Collected Papers of Ralph Ellison, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>62</sup> Paul Engle to Ralph Ellison, 18 August 1966, Part I, Box I, The Collected Papers of Ralph Ellison, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

would be selected by a panel of expert judges.<sup>63</sup> Administrators articulated dual goals for these grants: to award money to the “best” writers while also recognizing unknown writers. More relevant to the concerns of this chapter is the justification given for the grants. “The money is given to buy time,” Kizer explained, suggesting that these funds would free writers from having to hold down day jobs while working under contract.<sup>64</sup> In this statement, we see the differences between the WPA and the NEA most clearly: whereas the first brought the writer into the labor economy, awarding him a wage for a specific product (his writing), the second exempted the writer from the economy of paid labor and transformed his writing into something other than a commercial product. The grants freed the writer not only from economic pressures but also from the pressures of popular taste.

#### DISSENT IN A LOW KEY: THE AMERICAN LITERARY ANTHOLOGY

Like the grant program, *The American Literary Anthology*, one of the NEA’s first projects, sought to offer an alternative to the traditional publishing route as well as to resolve the tension between the best and the unknown. David Dempsey described the anthology as the first “book of general interest that has been openly subsidized by the taxpayer,” and as such the project garnered plenty of media attention.<sup>65</sup> Conceived as an annual anthology, the *American*

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<sup>63</sup> Carolyn Kizer to Roger Stevens, 19 October 1967, Box 12, RNEA, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

<sup>64</sup> Qtd. in David Dempsey, “Endowing the Arts” SR 8 December 1967, Box 12, RNEA, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

<sup>65</sup> David Dempsey, “Endowing the Arts” SR 8 December 1967, Box 12, RNEA, National Archives II, College Park, MD. The anthology was reviewed in many newspapers and periodicals, including *The New Republic*, *SR*, and *The New York Times*. Box 12, RNEA, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

*Literary Anthology* was published only once, by Random House in 1968. The anthology, edited by George Plimpton and Peter Arderly, featured the work of forty-eight short story writers, poets, and critics, including W. H. Auden, Allen Ginsberg, LeRoi Jones, and Denise Levertov as well as a group of relatively unknown writers whose work had been published in the “little magazines.” These low-circulation periodicals often published new, unknown, and avant-garde writers, and the anthology project was designed in part to support these magazines. (In addition to rewarding the writers with \$500 to \$1000 grants, the NEA gave \$250 to \$500 to the editors of the magazines that first published the work.)<sup>66</sup> For poets especially, the little magazines were the only forums in which they could publish experimental—or as one reviewer described it, “non-commercial”—work.<sup>67</sup> The NEA-sponsored anthology, like the little magazine, provided an alternative to the marketplace; experts, not common readers, evaluated the merit of each piece of writing. (In the case of the anthology, these experts included Walker Percy, William Styron, John Ashbery, James Dickey, and Susan Sontag.<sup>68</sup>) The panel system, which the NEA would employ for the majority of its grant initiatives in the decades to come, ostensibly ensured that it would promote the “best” writing regardless of its popular appeal.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> *The American Literary Anthology*, introduction to the second volume, Box 12, RNEA, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

<sup>67</sup> *New York Times*, 26 June 1968, Box 12, RNEA, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

<sup>68</sup> *Rocky Mountain Telegram*, 18 August 1968, Box 12, RNEA, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

<sup>69</sup> Though most reviewers celebrated the range of writing published in the anthology, the standards for publication were not unreservedly friendly to the most experimental or controversial writing. In a letter to Plimpton, NEA chairman Roger Stevens wrote, “And, speaking informally, I think we should bear in mind, particularly in this initial venture, the fact that all our works are being closely scrutinized, and any attempt to make drastic alterations in conventional standards of taste, moral and vocabulary, might be fatal to this enterprise.” Box 12, RNEA, National Archives II, College Park, MD. In later years, the NEA would be forced to

The “best” writing might need an alternative marketplace because it is formally difficult or ideological controversial or, of course, both. The little magazines and the NEA combined to promote work of this nature that might not be commercially viable. As a *New York Times* reviewer put it, “Where but in the pages of the ‘little’ magazines could they have expounded, explored and refined their un-utilitarian thoughts? In a period of much high-pitched, near hysterical writing, the new low key could become a form of dissent.”<sup>70</sup> The promotion of “dissent,” even in a “low key,” was perfectly consonant with the cold war liberalism: by publishing “dissenting” artists, the editors reassured critics like Dempsey, who acknowledged the specter of censorship: “The value of the Council’s program of assistance to writers will be measured, in part at least, by the freedom that goes with it. We are reassured in this respect to discover that both Allen Ginsberg and LeRoi Jones are represented in this anthology.”<sup>71</sup> By publishing writers like Ginsberg and Jones, the NEA could demonstrate not simply its tolerance of dissenting writers but rather its encouragement, even support, of controversial viewpoints.

The ideal of liberal tolerance also influenced the selection of the first recipients of the NEA’s individual grants for creative writing. The award winners for fictions included Grace Paley and Tillie Olsen, two openly Socialist writers who remained active in social and political organizing efforts throughout their careers. (Olsen’s relation to institutional support, federal and otherwise, will be discussed in detail in the following chapter.) Muriel Rukeyser, who served on the panel of judges, was likely responsible for the selection of Paley and Olsen. Paley, Olsen, and Rukeyser: all were critics of the U.S. government, and yet all received support from the

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make the case that the art it promoted was indeed appealing to the majority of American citizens, or at least not repulsive to them. See Chapter Four and the dissertation’s conclusion.

<sup>70</sup> *New York Times*, 26 June 1968, Box 12, RNEA, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

<sup>71</sup> Dempsey, “Endowing the Arts.”



government. Like the dissenting writers of the anthology, these inaugural grant winners demonstrate the federal government's belief that, through the administration of public funds, critique could be transformed into a form of patriotic expression.<sup>72</sup>

#### "A MAXIMUM FREEDOM": ELLISON, POLITICS, AND THE ARTS

Ellison could be critical of governmental policy, most notably with regard to its civil rights failures, but his contemporaries and future critics tended to see him as supportive of mainstream political movements, if not disengaged from politics altogether.<sup>73</sup> In *Heroism and the Black Intellectual*, Jerry Gafio Watts offers a polemical account when he describes how Ellison "long believed that he artistically created best when he was least actively engaged in politics" and argues that "Ellison represents a fundamentally important phenomenon in black intellectual life—the intellectual who believes that disengagement from politics best serves his creative ambitions."<sup>74</sup> Other scholars have reexamined Ellison's political commitments in terms of party politics. For instance, Sean McCann connects Ellison's novel to the debates about popular sovereignty and the public interest at midcentury. McCann argues that *Invisible Man* demands a "reassertion of popular sovereignty" and suggests that such a realization "would be

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<sup>72</sup> More specifically, the promotion of the anti-Stalinist left had been the "theoretical foundation" of the U.S. government's actions during the cultural Cold War. Michael Warner qtd in. Saunders, 63.

<sup>73</sup> For Ellison's critical perspective on American democracy and the ways in which it has failed African-Americans, see, among other examples, "Harlem is Nowhere," (*Essays*, 320-327). In general, Ellison was supportive of the Johnson administration's action on civil rights. As he writes at the end of "The Myth of the Flawed White Southerner," "When all of the returns are in, perhaps President Johnson will have to settle for being recognized as the greatest American President for the poor and for Negroes, but this, as I see it, is a very great honor indeed" (*Essays*, 566).

<sup>74</sup> Jerry Gafio Watts, *Heroism and the Black Intellectual* (Chapel Hill, UNC Press, 1994), 13, 21.

indistinguishable from the defeat of injustice.”<sup>75</sup> Most recently, Michael Szalay intervenes in this discussion by reading Ellison’s posthumously published novel as a commentary on the Democratic Party in the years before and after John F. Kennedy.<sup>76</sup>

What all of these accounts overlook, however, is Ellison’s direct engagement with American politics as a policymaker in the 1960s. Though Engle may have been the one to lead the charge for the Literature Program, it was Ellison who, in later days, would serve as one of the NEA Literature Program’s staunchest advocates and strongest defenders. In both published and unpublished writings, Ellison explained how the NEA “came as a long deferred answer to questions which had perplexed the nation’s leaders for close to two hundred years: What role should the imaginative arts play in the official affairs of a democratic society, and what stance should the Federal government take toward America’s art and its artists?”<sup>77</sup> He did so by looking backward toward the nation’s birth and asking how the Founding Fathers viewed the fine arts. The best example of this study—indeed, the best example of Ellison’s understanding of federal involvement in the arts—is a draft of an essay (or perhaps a speech) he wrote to acknowledge the twentieth anniversary of the NEA Literature Program. Here, Ellison rehearses the attitudes of John Adams and Benjamin Franklin before turning to two of his favorite topics, the vernacular (here called “regional slang”) and folk art, in order to describe “the Americanizing process” to

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<sup>75</sup> Sean McCann, *A Pinnacle of Feeling: American Literature and Presidential Government*, 136. See McCann, 120-138.

<sup>76</sup> Szalay, *Hip Figures: A Literary History of the Democratic Party*, 145-173.

<sup>77</sup> Ralph Ellison, untitled and undated document, Part I, Box I: 90, The Collected Papers of Ralph Ellison, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

which the fine arts were subjected.<sup>78</sup> When he talks about the NEA specifically, he describes artistic dissent as a sign of social and political freedom, and, therefore, an endorsement of the political principles upon which the nation was founded. “The arts are not merely forms of expression for individual artists,” he writes, “but a form of freedom which allows the American people to gauge their progress as they move toward and away from their democratic ideals. In this process of Americanization even artistic dissent is a form conducive to social health, and it is to the wellbeing of the nation that the arts function as an agency of order has been recognized.”<sup>79</sup> We hear in Ellison’s defense echoes of Kennedy’s address at Amherst (discussed in the introduction): somewhat paradoxically, by offering critique and performing dissent, the artist helps the nation achieve its ideals. Artistic “freedom” is thus intimately linked the “progress” of the American nation.

“Freedom” was, of course, a concept of central importance for Ellison, one to which he returned in many of his writings. Sometimes, “freedom” referred to the emancipation of his ancestors or the rights (or lack thereof) for African-Americans. (For example, in “A Congress Jim Crow Didn’t Attend” Ellison traces the movements of “Negroes from the North, South, East, and West [...] heading for Washington, seeking affirmation of their will to freedom,” *Essays*, 8). At other moments, though, the freedom Ellison desires is the freedom *from* racial identity, the freedom to operate as an autonomous and singular individual. The freedom described in Ellison’s defense of the NEA is closer to this second definition of freedom, a negative liberty that allows the artist to operate free from ideological constraint. As Ellison noted, in “The Novel as a Function of American Democracy,” these two kinds of freedom sketch out the contradictions of

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<sup>78</sup> Ralph Ellison, untitled and undated document, Part I, Box I: 90, The Collected Papers of Ralph Ellison, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

American democracy, the tension between individual will and collective good. It is the task of the novelist to resolve these tensions by using his individual experience to write about the nation:

The novel's function permits him a maximum freedom to express his own vision of reality. It allows him to write out of his own group background and his own individual background. But the novel also places upon him a responsibility of reporting—imaginatively of course—what is going on in his particular area of the American experience. How does the individual take the strains of his past and use them to illuminate his own sense of life? How are the great American ideals made manifest in his own particular environment? (*Essays*, 767)

Ellison conceives of a dialectical relationship between the novelist's individual experience and the broader social world, including both the world of the past ("group background") and the present. In this way, the novelist, perhaps unique among artists, could remain a private and free individual and yet could still be responding to, maybe even ameliorating, the problems of a social collectivity. In this way, Ellison aimed to negotiate the tension between individual and the collective; the nation, in his view, had already done so nicely.

For this reason, Ellison remained skeptical throughout his life of writing that tended towards the ideological, that was, in other words, overly invested in a collective identity. For example, when asked in an interview to describe how his work differed from the work of Richard Wright, Ellison says, "I think I was less interested in an ideological interpretation of Negro experience. [...] I felt that Wright was overcommitted to ideology—even though I, too, wanted many of the same things for our people" (*Essays*, 74). Similarly, in his exchange with James McPherson, he expresses a cautious tolerance of artists' ideological commitment, provided they don't impinge on artistic creativity: "My position has always been that ideology is one thing. Show me what you make of it. If you make art out of it, I will praise that art even while I argue with the ideology. But I haven't seen enough of the art. I suspect I have annoyed a few people by insisting upon the mastery of craft" (*Essays*, 398). Here and elsewhere, Ellison

reiterates his belief in “craft,” which is often aligned with abstract or modernist formal practices. This is the kind of individual art that appears divorced from collective politics. Political ideas are thus translated into aesthetic practices.

But in this era, many artists were becoming increasingly invested in collective politics. Following the assassination of Malcolm X, African-American artists like LeRoi Jones were developing a powerful model of political art, which came to be known as the Black Arts Movement. “The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community,” wrote Larry Neal in 1968. “The Black Arts and the Black Power concept both relate broadly to the Afro-American's desire for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic. One is concerned with the relationship between art and politics; the other with the art of politics.”<sup>80</sup> These tenets were antithetical to Ellison’s deeply held beliefs about the place of the artist. Whereas Neal and others believed that “Western aesthetic has run its course: it is impossible to construct anything meaningful within its decaying structure. [...] The cultural values inherent in western history must either be radicalized or destroyed,” Ellison continued to preach the value of Mark Twain, T.S. Eliot, and Henry James.<sup>81</sup> Thus, it is not surprising that when LeRoi Jones appealed to the NEA for support for his Harlem repertory theater, a site that would become the point of origin for the Black Arts movement, Ellison refused to support the proposal. As Stanley Crouch later recalled, “He [Ellison] knew that after 200 years of being unable to express themselves freely, blacks were susceptible to anyone among them who spouts off. He disliked the cheap demagoguery.”<sup>82</sup> In later years, when given

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<sup>80</sup> Larry Neal, “The Black Arts Movement,” *Drama Review* 12, no. 4 (1968): 29.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Qtd. in Rampersad, 414.

the opportunity to endorse writers for public and private grants or prizes, Ellison favored writers who shared his method of describing the social, the psychological, or the aesthetic without invoking a political framework. These writers included John Cheever and Saul Bellow, his close friends, as well as Cormac McCarthy.<sup>83</sup> To Ellison, expressing oneself “freely” did not translate to expressing political opinions through the means of art. Even as he became more intimately connected to politicians and government bureaucrats, he maintained this position, declaring at a symposium on the relationship between art and politics in March of 1968: “When poets try to be legislators, then we are in trouble.”<sup>84</sup>

#### RALPH ELLISON’S REGIONALISM: A DEMOCRATIC VISION

Despite his supposed antipathy towards artists who play at being politicians, Ellison himself could often be found discussing American democracy: its historical development, its theoretical foundations, and its cultural products. Ellison seemed to see democracy anywhere and everywhere. Reading his *Collected Essays*, one encounters democracy in many different guises; it is the “ground-term of our concept of justice, the basis of our scheme of social rationality, the rock upon which our society was built” (“Tell It Like it Is Baby” in *Essays*, 31), as well as, in this same essay, “its opposite.” It is “our term for social perfection (or a perfect society)” (“Going to the Territory” in *Essays*, 612); it is both “an ideal” (“Presentation to Bernard

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<sup>83</sup> In one episode, Ellison, after a falling out with Bellow, succeeded in awarding the National Book Award to Cheever for *The Wapshot Scandal*, which was up against Bellow’s *Herzog*. See Rampersad, 416. Ellison recommended Cormac McCarthy to the MacArthur Foundation in 1972; see Part I, Box I, The Collected Papers of Ralph Ellison, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>84</sup> Qtd. in Rampersad, 444.

Malamud” in *Essays*, 469) and a “condition” (“Brave Words for a Startling Occasion” in *Essays*, 153). As Kenneth Warren writes, “Although Ellison works and reworks the question of the Negro’s role in America and the responsibility of the novelist to the project of American democracy, his critical reflections remain occasional [...] Rather than systematize his insights, Ellison allowed them to stand, sometimes contradictorily, alongside one another[.]”<sup>85</sup> Ellison was well aware of these contradictions: “all great democratic documents,” he writes, “contain a strong charge of antidemocratic elements” (“*An American Dilemma*: Review,” *Essays*, 329). Though Ellison was discussing the Constitution’s failure to ensure racial equality, his statement also serves as a useful gloss for the political beliefs that I have discussed throughout this chapter.

Thus, Ellison’s involvement in the NEA Literature Program helps us understand his complex thinking about American democracy and its relationship to diversity, a quality that Ellison referred to as America’s “mixed background” (*Essays*, 499) and “complex and pluralistic wholeness” (*Essays*, 504). For the most part, critics have taken Ellison’s discussions of diversity to refer to racial diversity primarily, and have examined the challenges racial diversity poses to democratic governance.<sup>86</sup> But diversity, for Ellison, did not always mean, or did not primarily mean, racial diversity. Ellison’s involvement with the NEA also demonstrates how important *regional* diversity was to his thinking about both politics and culture. I want to suggest here that Ellison’s regional identity helps us understand his thinking about American democracy and cultural pluralism.

Regional diversity was also one of the goals of the NEA Literature Program. If one of the NEA’s effects was to move the artist from the margins of national life to the center, another

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<sup>85</sup> Warren, 22.

<sup>86</sup> On this point, see Szalay, *Hip Figures*, 153.

effect was to de-center American literary production. Major cities, most notably New York, had long been the site of most literary production, and in some sense quite rightly, as many writers and publishing houses situated themselves there. But writers from other parts of the country were clamoring for recognition, and the NEA aimed to honor these requests by funding and recognizing writers from across the nation without compromising their standards.<sup>87</sup> In addition to funding individual writers who hailed from different regions and to anthologizing writers from across the country, the NEA Literature Program also sponsored writers' travels to different parts of the country. This early initiative ended up being one of the more controversial funding endeavors, prompting an editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* called "The WPA, Updated and Gilt-Edged."<sup>88</sup> The author of the editorial commented on a grant awarded to Harvey Pearson for his travels to Arkansas, about which he planned to write. Like all NEA grants, there was no contractual obligation for Pearson; the funding was awarded for the potential plan described in his application. It is the lack of contract, it seems, that irked the author of the editorial: "Indeed, the historian may be led to conclude that the Government's new program for subsidizing the arts bears a remarkable resemblance to an updated and gilt-edged WPA project. Except that in the WPA days, which by today's standards seem thrifty, a writer had to be unemployed. And in return for his keep, he had to write something."<sup>89</sup> The comparison is not outlandish, but Ellison,

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<sup>87</sup> Even today, geographic representation remains a central concern of the literature program. The fortieth anniversary pamphlet suggests that diversity and merit are (miraculously) never in conflict: "And yet, the NEA's commitment to artistic excellence leads consistently to diversity. Take the 42 prose Fellows from FY (fiscal year) 2004: they hailed from 22 states; 43 percent of them were women; and they ranged in age from 27 to 58." Amy Stoll, "The NEA Literature Fellowship Turns Forty: An Introduction," 4.

<sup>88</sup> "The WPA, Updated and Gilt-Edged," *The Wall Street Journal*, Part II, Box II: 41, The Collected Papers of Ralph Ellison, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.



former WPA employee himself, took umbrage. In a letter to the *Journal*, one that he likely never sent and that he never published, Ellison defended the grant system (“the panel of independent judges prevents the Council from imposing upon the artistic freedom of the recipient”). More interesting, however, is Ellison’s defense of Pearson’s project, what amounts to the clearest statement of we might call Ellison’s regionalist sensibilities.

Much of the confusion in the American’s conception of his country (and thus of himself) arises because too many writers and intellectuals imagine that they can describe, interpret, and even psychoanalyze at long distance—people and regions of this nation whom and which they’ve never seen. Thus one of the overwhelming ironies of American fiction and cultural criticism lies in the fact that much of it is written by Americans who possess more first-hand knowledge of France, England, Germany, Greece, Italy—or even Israel than they do, say, of Arkansas, Mississippi, Washington (both D.C. and State) or Dakota, which for many is the name of an apartment building on Central Park West. A further irony: the knowledge which many such writers possess of Europe and Asia has been gained through grants extended by Foundations and institutions which grasp the importance of American writers making immediate contact with foreign cultures, but which overlooked the importance of American writers (most of whom cluster in NY) ~~knowing~~ learning as much as possible about their own country. [...] Isn’t it time that we had more first hand, imaginative reports, free of the intellectual provincialism of the East, on the American in his other habitats. Shouldn’t we know at least as much about our cultural regions as we do about the natural, financial and political resources of our land? And, finally, shouldn’t you consider it possible that the N.C.A. is involved in an effort not only of stimulating culture, but of conserving our varied cultural resources.<sup>90</sup>

The “provincialism of the East” condenses a sentiment that Ellison would explore in more detail and in different language in the essays collected in *Going to the Territory* (1986), a collection that announces in its very title the importance of regions that lie to the west. With this turn of phrase, Ellison inverts the relationship between metropole and periphery. The narrow mindset of the New York intellectual, who looks to Europe for inspiration, must be replaced by the

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<sup>90</sup> Ralph Ellison, untitled document, Part II, Box II, The Collected Papers of Ralph Ellison, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

adventurous spirit of the intrepid writer who wanders West, a forty-niner in search of cultural resources rather than gold.

Ellison may have migrated from the Territory to New York City, but he brought with him images and anecdotes from the regions of his past. He collated these cultural materials under the category of “folklore.” Ellison’s interest in folklore, which he incorporated into his fiction and which he expanded on in his essays, exemplifies the argument he makes above about regional resources. Examples of the folk tradition abound in *Invisible Man*, including the Trueblood episode, the peddler singing the blues, and allusions to Buckeye the Rabbit.<sup>91</sup> As Ellison’s earliest critics, including George Kent, noted, the use of folklore in *Invisible Man* substantiates the theory Ellison articulates elsewhere—most notably in “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke” (*Essays*, 100-112)—which is that vernacular culture and high culture are intertwined, or, put slightly differently, African-American culture is a foundational part of American culture in the broadest sense. As he told the *Paris Review*, “The history of the American Negro is a most intimate part of American history” (*Essays*, 214).<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: The Modern Library, 1994), 50-69, 169-173, 237.

<sup>92</sup> George Kent’s essay and Floyd Horowitz’s essay on Brer Bear and Brer Rabbit represent two of the early and important studies of the folk aspects of *Invisible Man*. See George E. Kent, “Ralph Ellison and Afro-American Folk and Cultural Tradition,” 160-170 in *Ralph Ellison: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. John Hersey (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1974) and Floyd R. Horowitz, “Ralph Ellison’s Modern Version of Brer Bear and Brer Rabbit in *Invisible Man*,” 45-49 in *The Critical Response to Ralph Ellison*, ed. Robert J. Butler (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000). Other early studies include Susan L. Blake, “Ritual and Rationalization: Black Folklore in the Works of Ralph Ellison,” *PMLA: Publication of the Modern Language Association* 94, no. 1 (1979): 121-136 and Robert G. O’Meally, “Riffs and Rituals: Folklore in the Work of Ralph Ellison,” in *Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction*, ed. Dexter Fisher and Robert Stepto (NY: MLA, 1979), 159-169. Houston A. Baker’s *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) suggests that Ellison collapses the distinction between folklore and literary art in the Trueblood episode (see 172-199). For a more recent study of the folk tradition in Ellison, see David Messmer, “Trumpets, Horns, and Typewriters: A Call

In these essays, Ellison often uses folklore to explore the significance of geography for the American writer. “[I]t is no accident,” he argues in “Going to the Territory,” “that much of the symbolism in our folklore is rooted in the imagery of geography” (*Essays*, 605). “Going to the Territory” is an essay in which Ellison’s writes lovingly about his home state, “the then wild territory of Oklahoma—and I assure you it was wild!” (*Essays*, 607). Ellison delivered the speech at a festival in his honor at Brown University in September 1979. Just a year earlier, the university had honored Inman Page, its first African-American graduate, who, by a strange twist of fate, had gone on to become the principal at Ellison’s Oklahoma City high school. “Who would have expected that through one of the members of the class of 1877, Brown University would play a role in the fate of a writer from Oklahoma?” (*Essays*, 600), Ellison remarks. The rhetorical question expresses his simultaneous affiliation with and estrangement from the intellectual culture of the East. The rest of the essay explores the generative value of geographically distinct experiences, such as the migration of runaway slaves, and culminates with a discussion of vernacular speech as “democratizing action” (*Essays*, 615). This study prompts Ellison to make the bold claim “Geography is fate” (*Essays*, 606), and though he later qualifies this statement slightly, the essay nonetheless makes the case for regional identity, which often exists in relation to racial identity, as a distinguishing feature of American experience.

The significance of regional identity for Ellison’s political thought, however, is expressed most clearly in “The Myth of the Flawed White Southerner.” In this homage to Johnson, Ellison returns to the infamous evening in 1965, and concludes that his departure from the intellectual party line had less to do with the issue of Vietnam and more “to do with the President’s own

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and Response Between Ralph Ellison and Frederick Douglass” *African American Review* 43, no. 4 (2009): 589-604; Messmer argues that Ellison signifies on Frederick Douglass and thus connects himself to an African-American literary tradition.

background, his accent of speech and his values [...] a President of Southern origin” (*Essays*, 559). Though not a Southerner himself, Ellison feels an affiliation with Johnson: “I had come from a region adjacent to that from which the President emerged, and where the American language was spoken—by whites, at least—with an accent much like that with which he speaks. It is a region that has grown faster and in a more unplanned way than the East has grown, and it is a place where one must listen beneath the surface of what a man has to say, and where rhetorical style is far less important than the relationship between a man’s statements and his conduct” (*Essays*, 559-60). Though there is a certain irony to this statement—Ellison’s high rhetorical style is notable in all of his essayistic writing—his interest in Johnson’s regional accent is consistent with his overall belief in the regional (specifically, the non-Eastern regional) as the embodiment of the national. This relationship is worked out in the following passage: “Thus, while a President’s style and way with language are of national importance, he cannot violate the integrity between his inherited idiom and his office without doing violence to his initial source of strength. For in fact his style and idiom form a connective linkage between his identity as representative of a particular group and region of people and his identity as President of *all* the people” (*Essays*, 560). This evaluation pertains to Ellison’s own prose as well, at least as he understood it. The last line of *Invisible Man*, “Who knows but that on the lower frequencies I speak for you,” might best express Ellison’s faith in what he describes as the “democratizing action” of the vernacular, even as it recalls the “low-key” dissent of artists who had less faith in American democracy than Ellison did.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 572. Hereafter cited in text by page number.

## INVISIBLE MAN AND IMAGINED ARTISTIC PRIVACY

The ending of *Invisible Man* is indeed a strange one. The narrator—a young, black, anonymous intellectual—has left a scene of political protest, where the streets ring out with the sound of gunshots, and descended underground, into the city’s sewer system. To light his way, he burns his high school diploma, then the papers given to him by a political organization that once employed him. He decides to “take up residence” (*Invisible*, 562) underground. The novel ends where it began, in a sewer hole illuminated by 1,369 light bulbs.

At first, this ending seems to be a straightforward celebration of radical independence and complete privacy. This reading makes sense, given the way the novel seems to indict any and all institutions—public, private, and political. At each stage of his education, the novel’s narrator brushes up against institutional prejudice and corruption. He wins a scholarship to college from his town’s Board of Education, but he only receives the money after being forced to deliver a humiliating speech during a violent spectacle. He is then kicked out of said college for failing to shield white donors from the sharecroppers living near the campus. The college president sends the narrator north to New York with a sealed letter of recommendation; this letter will supposedly open doors, but the narrator soon learns, to his embarrassment, that the letter actually tells prospective employers to keep the narrator running. A leftist organization known as the Brotherhood seems to promise a better form of institutional support when it hires the narrator to organize the citizens of Harlem. But this institution soon disappoints as well: the Brothers criticize the narrator’s speeches and soon remove him from his organizing territory. Taken together, these incidents amount to a strong critique of institutional patronage; we see that the budding intellectual is always beholden to the powers that have provided financial and spiritual support.

Complete independence from institutions, however, is portrayed as equally unappealing. Just before he descends underground, the narrator joins protestors in Harlem, who are breaking into stores and burning down buildings. The narrator believes that he's finally found a way to engage in useful political action, but he soon suspects that he and his fellow protestors have been set up by the Brotherhood. He predicts an escalation in violence and expresses guilt:

I could see it now, see it clearly and in growing magnitude. It was not suicide but murder. The committee had planned it. And I had helped, had been a tool. A tool at the very moment I had thought myself free. (*Invisible*, 544)

Ellison never completely verifies his narrator's suspicion, but the nightmarish scene that ensues lends credence to these paranoid thoughts. The Brotherhood deprives the narrator of his freedom—and his safety—by *failing to intervene*, by letting violence break out and claim the most oppressed as its first victims. With this episode, Ellison suggests that individual freedom requires institutional intervention.

This is the kind of freedom that the narrator finds at the novel's end. He achieves freedom and privacy by way of public infrastructure. The city's sewer system—the domain of the department of public works—leads him to a family's coal cellar, where he decides to stay. He has finally found a room of his own, in which he can write and think. He reflects: “Here, at least, I could try to think things out in peace, or if not in peace, in quiet. I would take up *residence* underground. The end was in the beginning” (*Invisible*, 562, emphasis added). This is a writer's residence, reached by public infrastructure, and it is a model for the kind of patronage program that Ellison would help create, one that would reflect the kind of privacy and independence that he believed the creation of art demands. It is from this position of solitude that the narrator produces his book, the novel that we have just read. The writing process provides him with his most useful education yet. “So why do I write, torturing myself to put it down?” he asks

rhetorically. “Because in spite of myself I’ve learned some things. [...] Here I’ve set out to throw my anger in the world’s face, but now that I’ve tried to put it all down the old fascination with playing a role returns, and I’m drawn upward again” (*Invisible*, 570). It is this knowledge that will allow him to emerge aboveground, to participate once again in public life.

*Invisible Man* is thus novel about the perils of patronage, but it is also a novel that provides a model for the right kind of patronage. For Ellison, this is patronage that preserves the writer’s privacy and frees him from other forms of work. Ellison intended to build a public patronage program for writers who, like him, kept their political positions private. These would be writers who asked to be left alone, who claimed to speak only for themselves, in the hopes that, in so doing, they might also be speaking for you.

## CONCLUSION

Ellison, it turns out, was not as strongly anti-institutional, or as apolitical, as he at first appears. Ellison once described himself as “a novelist interested in that area of the national life where political power is institutionalized and translated into democratic ritual and national style” (*Essays*, 557), and his involvement with the NEA shows just how strong and dedicated that interest was. We see here also how Ellison used the institutions of public life to preserve the writer’s privacy, *and* how this privacy allowed the writer to report on and influence the public sphere.

Over the next few decades, the model of artistic privacy would wane, and collective social and political movements would wax. Again, the NEA had a role to play. As the following chapters will show, many of the major movements in American literary history from the 1960s onward—including the emergence of feminist criticism and the rise of minimalist fiction—are,

in part, the product of the NEA Literature Program's initiatives. Though no other future NEA bureaucrat would rival Ellison in stature, other major American authors, including Tillie Olsen and Raymond Carver, would become involved with the NEA at crucial moments in their respective careers. By the end of the twentieth century, the "great artist" is no longer a "solitary figure," as Kennedy observed in 1963, but a figure intimately involved in a network of federal funding, promotion, and education. The consequences of this development are varied, but each example will show that art is always, consistently, "profoundly political."



Chapter Two  
Creativity and the “Professional” Woman Writer:  
Olsen and Sexton at the Bunting Institute

In 1961, the year Kennedy initiated the President’s Commission on the Status of Women, Tillie Olsen published her debut book, a collection of stories called *Tell Me A Riddle*. A sought-after young writer of proletarian fiction in the 1930s, Olsen lapsed into silence in the decades that followed her first publications in *Partisan Review* and other leftist periodicals. Though *Tell Me A Riddle* did not sell particularly well, it was a critical success and validated her second attempt at a literary career. The book was selected as one of the year’s best by *Time*, in which the editors praised Olsen’s stories for being “delicate as fugues.”<sup>94</sup> William Peden, writing in the *New York Times*, described the comfort Olsen’s stories offer: “It is a difficult and painful thing, to be a human being [...] but her characters are never completely alone, are not utterly lost.” Robert Kirsch, reviewing the collection in the *LA Times*, repeated words of praise he had written when the title story was first published in *New World Writing*: “Mrs. Olsen writes with a passionate economy of language, does not reject the obligation to probe deep beneath the surface of experience where the powerful and lingering dilemmas of living are to be found.”<sup>95</sup>

Perhaps the most important words of praise, however, came from a fellow writer, the poet Anne Sexton. Sexton’s first foray into prose, the story “Dancing a Jig,” was published alongside Olsen’s “Tell Me A Riddle” in *New World Writing* in 1960. At this point, Sexton was coming off the success of her first own debut, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960), in which she described the experiences of motherhood and mental illness with a frankness that seduced some critics and

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<sup>94</sup> “Books: The Year’s Best,” *Time*, December 29, 1961, 62.

<sup>95</sup> Robert R. Kirsch, “The Book Report: A Rewarding New Collection,” *Los Angeles Times*, 22 April 1960, B5.

repulsed others. Compelled to write, Sexton offered praise and admiration: “I cannot possibly tell you how much your story has moved me. I am also going to write the editors of N.W.W. to congratulate them on finding and printing the best short story of years and years. That story will never die. People will be reading it in anthologies for many years to come. I feel proud of you, although I do not know you.”<sup>96</sup> Olsen responded in kind, saying that she had placed Sexton’s photographs on the wall alongside Tolstoy and “others who sustain and judge me.”<sup>97</sup> Thus began a correspondence through which the two writers bonded over writer’s block, the difficulties of motherhood, and challenges to their mental and physical health. Both women worried about how to balance their domestic responsibilities with their artistic ambitions; this problem was compounded for Olsen by her family’s economic insecurity, which forced her to work outside the home as well. Olsen’s strained economic circumstances were alleviated, to some degree, when she joined Sexton at the Bunting Institute at Radcliffe College in 1963. The Bunting Institute, a fellowship program for women artists and scholars that was founded the same year Olsen published her collection, aimed to help gifted women restart careers that had been put on hold as they raised families. It was not until they began to work in an environment dedicated to

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<sup>96</sup> Anne Sexton, *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters*, ed. Linda Gray Sexton and Lois Ames (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 103. Her admiration endured; in a letter years later, Sexton expressed a similar sentiment: “I don’t think I have ever read anything over and over as often as TMAR. [...] I mean TMAR no matter on which page I might start (I don’t always read it in sequence) hurts my throat. I start to cry. Work not to cry. I read and then I talk back to it ...” Anne Sexton to Tillie Olsen, undated, Tillie Olsen Papers, Special Collections and Manuscripts, Stanford University.

<sup>97</sup> Qtd. in Diane Middlebrook, “Circle of Women Artists: Tillie Olsen and Anne Sexton at the Radcliffe Institute,” in *Listening to Silences: New Essays in Feminist Criticism*, ed. Elaine Hedges and Shelley Fisher Fishkin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 18. To the best of my knowledge, Middlebrook is the only scholar to have studied in detail the interactions of Olsen, Sexton, Maxine Kumin, and others at the Radcliffe Institute. Whereas Middlebrook’s interest is biographical and largely focused on the significance of the Institute for Sexton, I take a sociological approach and ask how the Bunting Institute created an environment that produced particular brand of feminist politics.

the support and development of women artists and thinkers that they developed a political agenda for their personal struggles. It was at Radcliffe that these women met other writers, shared works of past and contemporary feminist thought, and developed an understanding of what it meant to be a “professional” writer. Thus, though the editors of *Time*, proclaimed that 1961 “has not been a good year for genuine books,” it was a significant year indeed in American literary history: it marked the founding of a program that would change the way women artists and their audiences thought about work, art, and what it meant to combine the two in a literary career.<sup>98</sup>

The Bunting Institute thus represents an alternative model of patronage: private as opposed to public, meritocratic as opposed to democratic. Nonetheless, it also intersects with the NEA Literature Program in two important ways. The Bunting Institute is one of many private institutions that applied to the NEA for funding; it applied for and won several grants throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>99</sup> Secondly, individuals involved with the Institute were also among the early recipients of NEA Creative Writing Fellowships. Olsen, one of the central figures in this chapter, was one of the inaugural grant recipients, and her case demonstrates how the NEA’s mission to fund formally difficult, politically dissident writers ended up amplifying marginalized voices. Olsen managed to use government funds to her advantage, agitating for the reform of educational institutions like the very university that sponsored her at a crucial moment in her career. At the same time, though, Olsen’s rhetoric preserved the idea of creative excellence. Exploring these contradictions in funding institutions and in the words of one of the writers they supported is the first aim of the chapter.

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<sup>98</sup> “Books: The Year’s Best,” 61.

<sup>99</sup> Carolyn Kizer, 1967 report (untitled), RNEA, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

The second goal of the chapter (and the one with which it begins in the following section) is to reconstruct the discourse around creativity, work, and women's political liberty in the 1960s, a discourse that these forms of patronage inspired and facilitated. To that end, the chapter charts a genealogy of feminist thought that evolved around the idea of the female artist in the middle of the twentieth century. Focusing specifically on this seminal moment in the careers of Olsen and Sexton, I show how during the Cold War era, growing institutional support for working artists combined with changes in both the intellectual environment and the domestic workforce to produce a new idea about the professional woman and, specifically, about the professional "creative" woman. In this historical moment, "creativity" became a concept central to liberal feminism and set the tone for early feminist approaches to literary history. It was also reflected in the themes and forms of women's creative work. If we are to understand the significance of Olsen and Sexton to American feminism and to American literary history, then we must begin with the Bunting Institute at Radcliffe College, the institution that first brought these two women, as well as these two traditions, into direct relation.<sup>100</sup>

#### "CRYPTO-FEMINISM," COMPETITION, COLLABORATION: CIRCLES OF WOMEN WRITERS

*"Crypto-feminism, it would appear, is a mass movement. This is something new on the American scene."*

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<sup>100</sup> As Bourdieu explains, in order to understand how literature is produced, received, and evaluated, we must study information about "institutions – e.g. academies, journals, magazines, galleries, publishers, etc. – and about persons, their relationships, liaisons and quarrels, information about the ideas and problems which are 'in the air' and circulate orally in gossip and rumor" (314). Pierre Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed," *Poetics* 12 (1983): 311-356.

In the early 1960s, at the same time that Olsen was restarting her writing career, other women were developing career goals of their own. This upsurge in women in the workforce seemed to indicate the emergence of an agreeable, non-threatening form of feminism, at least according to the mainstream media. In October 1962, *Harper's Magazine* published a special issue on "The American Female" that explored this development. The issue featured, among other articles, psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim's analysis of the female psyche, a study of female fashion, a comparative discussion of Swedish marital trends, and a poem by Sexton, "Mother and Jack and the Rain," that was likely deemed a good fit for the issue because its first line is an allusion to Virginia Woolf: "I have a room of my own."<sup>102</sup> If the politics of these individual pieces seem unconnected and even contradictory, that is because the editors were grappling with a social movement that, as far as they could tell, lacked a defined political agenda. The foreword to the issue gives us a sense of the paradoxical nature of women's position at the time:

Indeed, it can be argued that—beneath the eye shadow, the black leotard, or the wig—the American woman of today is not very different from her mother or grandmother. She is equally attached to the classic feminine values—sexual attractiveness, motherly devotion, and the nurturing role in home and community affairs. She is no great figure in public life or the professions. And like most men, she is repelled by the slogans of old-fashioned feminism.

Yet an extraordinary number of women are troubled by some of the same problems that bothered the Women's Rights agitators of the past. Not, of course, the vote or the property rights of wives. Those issues were useful symbols and focal points of the legislative battles of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But this was not really what the Women's Rights Movement was about. In part it was simply an outcropping from the great social reform causes of their day in which all the women leaders were deeply engaged—abolition, temperance,

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<sup>101</sup> "Foreword," in "The American Female," special issue, *Harper's*, October 1962, 117.

<sup>102</sup> "The American Female," special issue, *Harper's*, October 1962, 117-180.

trade unionism, and world peace among others. Insofar as they were concerned with their own state—and they were much concerned—they were ardently determined to extend their vocation beyond the bedroom, kitchen, and nursery. Women, they said, must re-examine their roles as wives, mothers, and members of the human race.

This is precisely what is going on today. However, it is happening so privately and with such an unmilitant air that one must look to statistics for perspective—to the fact, for instance, that the number of women holding jobs outside their homes has nearly doubled since 1940, making almost a third of our present labor force female.

Crypto-feminism, it would appear, is a mass movement. This is something new on the American scene.<sup>103</sup>

The uncertainty of the observers is reflected in the pervasive use of qualifications (“Not, of course, the vote...” “But this was not really ...” “Yet” “In part...” “However”), as the editors try to preserve conventional ideals of femininity and domesticity while recognizing the irrefutable fact of increased female employment. At the same time, the changes in tone reflect the attempt to distinguish between different eras of the women’s movement. The tone shifts from analytic to condescending as the editors alternately examine nineteenth- and twentieth-century women; the depiction of First Wave feminists, “repuls[ive]” to modern men and women alike, becomes increasingly insulting later in the piece: “For the fighting feminists were an eccentric minority. [...] Many ladies were leery of crusaders who—since their first convention in Seneca Falls—had been called atheists and probably hermaphrodites. Nor did the Bloomer Girls help matter by looking ridiculous in baggy pants topped by layers of shawls and peplums.”<sup>104</sup> Whereas these early crusaders “spent most of their waking hours on the lecture platform,” today’s movement is “happening so privately and with such an unmilitant air.”<sup>105</sup> In other words, this movement is

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<sup>103</sup> “Foreword,” “The American Female,” *Harper’s*, 117-118.

<sup>104</sup> “Foreword,” “The American Female,” *Harper’s*, 117-118.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

silent, private, almost secretive, as the term “crypto-feminism” suggests. Though the foreword acknowledges women’s gains in the workplace, the rhetoric of privacy suggests that the influence of this movement is limited.<sup>106</sup>

Some feminist leaders were willing to work within these limits. Just two years before the *Harper’s* article, the president of Radcliffe College had founded a groundbreaking institution for the advancement of women, and she managed to do so while publicly proclaiming the significance of motherhood. The president was Mary Ingraham Bunting, a prominent microbiologist, and the foundation was the Bunting Institute, later renamed the Radcliffe Institute for Independent Study. By bringing female scholars to Radcliffe, giving them access to university resources, and providing them with a stipend for childcare, she hoped to address “a serious waste of a most important national resource [...] and a negation of the promise of democracy.”<sup>107</sup> Pressing on the disconnect between the promise shown by female undergraduates and women’s limited professional success, Bunting brought her concerns into the national spotlight by taking out a full-page ad in the *New York Times*. The *Times* later reported, “Its originators consider it a vital step to end a major loss of talent, which at present is ‘intolerable’ to the nation and ‘disastrous’ for many women in their own lives and careers.”<sup>108</sup> The Institute was front-page news in the *Boston Globe* and *Boston Herald*, and it remained in the public eye

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<sup>106</sup> For more on the gendered nature of Cold War privacy, see Deborah Nelson, *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

<sup>107</sup> Mary Ingraham Bunting, proposal, 21 July 1960, Series 1, Box 1, Files of the Bunting Institute, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

<sup>108</sup> “Radcliffe Plans Institute to Aid the Gifted Woman,” *New York Times*, 20 November 1960, Series 1, Box 1, Files of the Bunting Institute, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

throughout its formative years, thanks in part to Bunting's talent for articulating women's rights as a matter of national interest. In May of 1961, she wrote a feature for the *New York Times Magazine* entitled, "A Huge Waste: Educated Womanpower." Reiterating her concern about the future of female college graduates, Bunting drew on her background in biology for a metaphor. "Perhaps," Bunting wrote, "there are innate limitations [that prevent women from success] or perhaps, like plants kept under conditions that encourage vegetative growth but do not permit flowering, these women are the victims of cultural circumstances."<sup>109</sup> Allaying fears that independent scholarship would result in radical independence for women and the dissolution of the American family—"studying, in appropriate doses, mixes wonderfully with homemaking," she assured—Bunting ended her piece with a rousing call to action appropriate for the Cold War era: "If our national needs and purposes are to be fulfilled, it seems clear that all individuals should have the best of opportunities to employ all their talents. It is not so much for women as for our heritage and our aspirations that America must assess again, thoughtfully and purposefully, their place in our society."<sup>110</sup>

The moderation of this vision attracted the attention and support of the mainstream media. *Time* featured Bunting on its cover on November 3, 1961. Bunting's spectacled face, softened by the wide brushstrokes of the artist's oil paint, looks slightly away from the reader towards a recent college graduate.<sup>111</sup> The profile that accompanied the 1961 cover praised the "reasonable, constructive, moderate, and just slightly outraged stand" that Bunting had taken

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<sup>109</sup> Mary Ingraham Bunting, "A Huge Waste: Educated Womanpower," *New York Times Magazine*, 7 May 1961, Series 1, Box 1, Files of the Bunting Institute, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

<sup>110</sup> Bunting, "A Huge Waste."

<sup>111</sup> *Time*, November 3, 1961.



and, as Bunting does in her *New York Times Magazine* piece, linked the fate of women to national interests.<sup>112</sup> When it comes to the professional success of women, “Russia outdoes the U.S.” the author warned, and assures readers that “American men do not really want the world to be half female and half free.”<sup>113</sup> The binary drawn here reinforces freedom as a masculine quality and yet suggests that women must share this freedom if the nation is to advance. Although “women need men and motherhood,” they also need “to put their brains and education to creative use.”<sup>114</sup> Bunting’s appearance on the cover of *Time* thus signifies an often-overlooked starting point for the women’s movement, one that sought to revolutionize women’s education and the economics of housework without challenging the sanctity of the home itself.

Bunting had tapped into a latent desire in many American women. That first year, 2,400 called or wrote to ask about the program, and 200 eventually applied to the Institute.<sup>115</sup> Of the inaugural fellows, nineteen had pursued advance study; the only one without a college education was Anne Sexton, who nonetheless presented herself with self-confidence. “I feel that I am already an accomplished poet,” she wrote on her application, “What I ask now is the opportunity to be a lasting one.”<sup>116</sup> At this point, Sexton had published *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, which was well received by the poetry community (with the notable exception of James Dickey), and

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<sup>112</sup> Education: One Woman, Two Lives,” *Time*, November 3, 1961, 68.

<sup>113</sup> Bunting, “A Huge Waste,” 69.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Diane Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 144.

<sup>116</sup> Anne Sexton, application, Series 2, Box 1, Files of the Bunting Institute, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

was regularly publishing poems in the *New Yorker*, *Harper's*, and the *Hudson Review*.<sup>117</sup> Sexton represented a new style of American poetry, one called “confessional.”<sup>118</sup> Influenced by W. D. Snodgrass and Robert Lowell, Sexton wrote about her experiences as a mother, as a daughter, and as a patient in a mental hospital. Though she drew the material for some of her best poems from uniquely female experiences—for example, “The Double Image”—Sexton did not often express pride in her womanhood. To the contrary, she wrote to her mentor Snodgrass, “I shall never write a really good poem. I overwrite. I am a reincarnation of Edna St. Vincent [. . .] He [Lowell] didn't say I was like Edna (I do — a secret fear) — also a fear of writing as a woman writes. I wish I were a man — I would rather write the way a man writes.”<sup>119</sup> The environment in Lowell's Boston University seminar, where Anne was an auditor, contributed to this fear. In Lowell's version of literary history, male poets were “major,” while female poets—with the exception of his friend Elizabeth Bishop—were almost always “minor.” As Kathleen Spivack recalls, “At the time we all met in Robert Lowell's writing workshop, there was a great prejudice against ‘women writers.’ This particularly referred to women who tried to combine female and

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<sup>117</sup> In a review for *Poetry*, Dickey expressed a combination of embarrassment and scorn for Sexton's personal subject matter: “Anne Sexton's poems so obviously come out of deep, painful section of the author's life that one's literary opinions scarcely seem to matter; one feels tempted to drop them furtively into the nearest ashcan, rather than be caught with them in the presence of so much naked suffering.” Dickey, “Five First Books,” in Steven Colburn, ed., *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 63-64. Dickey would write an even more scathing review following the publication of *All My Pretty Ones* in 1962, but he eventually softened towards Sexton and, according to Middlebrook, pursued a romantic connection with her later in life.

<sup>118</sup> M. L. Rosenthal was the first to use the term “confessional” as a label for this form of modern poetry. See M. L. Rosenthal, “Robert Lowell and the Poetry of Confession,” in *The Modern Poets: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 225-244.

<sup>119</sup> Sexton to W. D. Snodgrass, October 6, 1958, in Linda Gray Seton and Lois Ames, ed., *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), 40.

poetic roles. [...] A women who opted for both art and family life was expected to pay for the compromise, either by inferior art or by emotional casualties.”<sup>120</sup>

Despite, or perhaps because of, the uneasy rhetoric about women writers, Lowell’s seminar was the staging ground for formative encounters between some of the most important female poets of midcentury America. Maxine Kumin, who would go on to win the Pulitzer Prize for *Up Country* (1973), became one of Anne Sexton’s closest and most supportive friends. Sylvia Plath, a fellow auditor, and Sexton bonded over liquor and a love of death; Sexton recalled their nights drinking with George Starbuck: “Often, very often, Sylvia and I would talk at length about our first suicides; at length, in detail, and in depth between the free potato chips. Suicide is, after all, the opposite of the poem. Sylvia and I often talked opposites. We talked death with burned-up intensity, both of us drawn to it like moths to an electric light bulb. Sucking on it!”<sup>121</sup> In an interview, Plath expressed admiration for Sexton’s work: “I think particularly of the poetess Anne Sexton, who writes also of her experiences as a mother; as a mother who’s had a nervous breakdown, as an extremely emotional and feeling young woman. And her poems are wonderfully craftsmanlike poems, and yet they have a kind of emotional and psychological depth which I think is something perhaps quite new and exciting.”<sup>122</sup> In her private journal, however, Plath demonstrated a fiercely competitive nature and set out to trump other women poets, both historical and contemporary. She kept a running list of great female poets and would place herself among them according to her latest output. “Arrogant, I think I have written lines which qualify me to be the Poetess of America,” she wrote, “Who rivals? Well, in history Sappho,

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<sup>120</sup> Kathleen Spivack, “Poets and Friends,” Colburn, ed., *Telling the Tale*, 36-36.

<sup>121</sup> Qtd. in Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton*, 107.

<sup>122</sup> Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton*, 105.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, Amy Lowell, Emily Dickinson, Edna St. Vincent Millay—all dead. Now: Edith Sitwell and Marianne Moore, the aging giantesses, and poetic godmother Phyllis McGinley is out—light verse: she’s sold herself. Rather: May Swenson, Isabella Gardner, and most close, Adrienne Cecile Rich—who will soon be eclipsed by these eight poems.”<sup>123</sup> Rich, for her part, acknowledged the competitive atmosphere brewing in greater Boston at this time: “Competing in the literary establishment felt to me very defeminizing.”<sup>124</sup> Being among other women required these artists to respond either with characteristically unfeminine behavior— aggressive, cutthroat, competitive—or with a docility that would compromise their artistic careers.

By institutionalizing female competition, the Bunting Institute provided a corrective to the kind of competition that Rich and Plath describe. Once the fellowship recipients had been selected out from the other applicants, they were free to work *alongside* each other rather than *against* each other. The fellowship served as a “status symbol,” in Sexton’s words, one accepted and recognized by the literary world.<sup>125</sup> Of course, the prize came with material as well as symbolic rewards: \$2,000, an office at Radcliffe, and access to Harvard’s libraries and classes. But even the money itself was more important symbolically; as Sexton explained to an interviewer, “if you get this amount of money, then everyone immediately thinks you’re respected, and beyond that, you’re contributing.”<sup>126</sup> For most of the Bunting fellows, their financial contributions paled in comparison to their husbands’ salaries, so the respect that this

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<sup>123</sup> Qtd. in Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton*, 104.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>125</sup> Qtd. in Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton*, 152.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

money earned had less to do with what it bought and more to do with what it signified. When Alice Ryerson, a psychologist studying the first group of fellows, asked Sexton if she had ever felt at a disadvantage in her profession because she was a woman, Sexton replied, “Yes. Definitely [...] There are so many lady poets and they’re almost all so bad [...] There are whole clubs of women poets: it’s all right to be a poet if you’re a woman. Therefore you can be a bad one. [...] Women don’t strive to make anything real out of it. They just dabble in it.” When asked to clarify the difference between being a dabbler and being a professional, she said, “Money helps: it’s the only thing—in the society I live in.”<sup>127</sup>

In drawing the distinction between amateur and profession—between “dabbling” and earning—Sexton recapitulated a binary drawn by Simone de Beauvoir roughly 10 years earlier. In *The Second Sex* (1949, trans. 1952), Beauvoir argues that for some women, artistic pursuits reinforce their feminine dependency. “Woman’s situation inclines her to seek salvation in literature and art,” she writes. “But the very circumstances that turn woman to creative work are also obstacles she will very often be incapable of surmounting. When she decides to paint or write merely to fill her empty days, painting and essays will be treated as fancywork; she will devote no more time or care to them, and they will have about the same value.”<sup>128</sup> Colette is one of the few women, in Beauvoir’s eyes, who managed the transition from “amateur” to “professional”; the difference, it seems, depends on perseverance, rigor, and a period of training.<sup>129</sup> Thus, the definition of the “professional” artist is less directly tied to the literary

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>128</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley (1952; repr. New York: Vintage, 1989), 704.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 705.

marketplace than one might think. While it is not surprising, necessarily, that money should define the seriousness or success of an artistic career, it is surprising that the money here is not compensation for work accomplished but rather an award for potential, for work yet to be produced. The Bunting Institute offered an alternative economy to the literary marketplace, one that sought to restart women's careers even as the awards it offered validated their professional identities.

The Bunting Institute was far from the first private organization to offer grants to scholars and artists with the hope of funding future work. Both the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation and the Ford Foundation had been offering generous grants to artists since 1925 and 1936, respectively. During the early years of the 1960s, however, both public and private support for the arts was growing, and grants had become widely available and increasingly appealing to writers. This development changed the concept of the writer's career, which had historically been enabled by book sales or, quite often, by independent wealth. Some, like novelist and critic David Dempsey, worried that writers would come to rely too much on grants and would fear becoming popular.<sup>130</sup> For the women at Radcliffe, the question was less about popularity—only Sexton could be considered a “popular” writer at the time she received her grant—and more about “professional” identity and politics it entailed.

#### FEMININE MYSTIQUE AND FEMINIST MOBILIZING at RADCLIFFE

As a writer who had been absent from the publishing world for over two decades, Olsen desperately needed the validation (not to mention the money) that the Bunting Institute promised. When Olsen wrote to Sexton inquiring about the Radcliffe Institute, Sexton responded

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<sup>130</sup> See Introduction.

enthusiastically and likely worked behind the scenes to ensure Olsen's acceptance.<sup>131</sup> Olsen applied to Radcliffe in 1961, asking for "[e]conomic freedom;" she was accepted and stayed at the Institute from the fall of 1962 to the spring of 1964.<sup>132</sup> Sexton and her friend and fellow poet Maxine Kumin stayed on at the Institute for a second academic year; along with painter Barbara Swan and sculptor Marianna Pineda, the five women artists formed a tight-knit cohort and considered themselves the "Equivalents" of the scholars who worked alongside them.

Thus, in 1962 and 1963, the Radcliffe Institute provided especially fertile ground for the regeneration of American feminism. Olsen and Sexton exchanged Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*—a fitting text for women who were, for the first time, working in private offices—and talked freely of their admiration for women poets like Edna St. Vincent Millay and Sarah Teasdale. They listened to women with doctorates deliver expert lectures in their respective fields. They were primed for the publication in 1963 of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. Part sociology, part popular psychology, part literary analysis, and part personal history, Friedan's book adumbrated the problems of the suburban, white, middle-class housewife. The book sold an unexpectedly high number of copies and ignited what came to be called simply the "women's movement."<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Olsen denied receiving any help from Sexton (see Panthea Reid, *Tillie Olsen: One Woman, Many Riddles* [New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010], 401 n. 1) but a letter from Sexton suggests otherwise: "You got it! You got it! You got it! They told me in secret today because I had talked to them about you when You [*sic*] told me you'd applied and they knew I'd care." Sexton to Olsen, May 3, 1962, Series 3, Tillie Olsen Papers, Special Collections and Manuscripts, Stanford University, Palo Alto, CA.

<sup>132</sup> Tillie Olsen, application, Series 14, Tillie Olsen Papers, Special Collections and Manuscripts, Stanford University, Palo Alto, CA.

<sup>133</sup> For this term and for Friedan's own account of her book's effect, see Betty Friedan, *It Changed My Life: Writings on the Women's Movement* (New York: Random House, 1976), xiii-xix and *passim*.

But before women could be liberated, they had to first recognize that they were in chains. *The Feminine Mystique* made the case for women's liberation by suggesting in its very title that these chains were immaterial—mystical even—and that a change in attitude was all that was needed to change material conditions. As Daniel Horowitz has argued, “The power and limitations of her [Friedan's] book came from her insistence that the feminine mystique was a mental construct and as such something women could change with equally powerful ideas [...] Friedan argued that women could discover the answers in themselves and not through religious, economic, political, or social change. If they had the wrong ideas, all they needed was the right ones, which her book provided.”<sup>134</sup> Friedan accomplishes this aim by presenting women's problems in affective (rather than economic) terms. The book opens like a crime novel or a thriller: “The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States.”<sup>135</sup> To solve this problem, women must first share their feelings with other women. “Each suburban housewife struggle[s] with it alone” she reports, and is “afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—‘Is this all?’” (Friedan, 57). If she does pose the question, Friedan suggests, she feels “ashamed” and worries that she must be “neurotic” (Friedan, 62). When she finally voices her concern to other women, speaker and listener experience a joint revelation: “Suddenly they realized they all shared the same problem, the problem that has no name. They began, hesitantly, to talk about it” (Friedan, 63). What we

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<sup>134</sup> Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of The Feminine Mystique: The American Left, The Cold War, and Modern Feminism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 221.

<sup>135</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963; repr. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2001), 57. Hereafter cited in text by page number.



see in the book's first chapter is a tale of recovery narrated in the terms of psychotherapy. Suppressed emotions—"buried" and "unspoken"—manifest themselves in neurotic behaviors, and these emotions can only be dealt with by beginning to "talk," not to a psychotherapist, in this case, but to a sympathetic friend and fellow sufferer. Collective action is supplanted by an individual's therapeutic experience. This brand of talk therapy ends in tears; the women have parted ways, yet they are relieved "just to know they [are] not alone" (Friedan, 63). No plans have been hatched, and yet a narrative of healing seems to be underway already.

Friedan's work had a larger impact on the cultural environment than any other text about women in midcentury America. And yet, Friedan did not really express many ideas that were particularly radical or particularly new. Beauvoir had examined the social construction of femininity and advocated the "liberation" of the "independent woman" fourteen years before Friedan's book.<sup>136</sup> With its attention to fiction as well as history and sociology, *The Second Sex* was a model for Friedan's book formally and thematically. Though *The Feminine Mystique* contains few citations from Beauvoir, Friedan acknowledged the influence of Beauvoir in 1976, the year after two women met in person for the first time.<sup>137</sup>

Feminist impulses were also being expressed closer to home. Since the mid-1940s, Popular Front feminists such as Eleanor Flexner, Elizabeth Hawes, and Betty Millard combined

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<sup>136</sup> De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 679.

<sup>137</sup> In her introduction to "A Dialogue with Simone de Beauvoir (1975)," Friedan admits, "I had never met Simone de Beauvoir, but I had learned my own existentialism from her. It was *The Second Sex* that introduced me to that approach to reality and political responsibility—that, in effect, freed me from the rubrics of authoritative ideology and led me to whatever original analysis of women's existence I have been able to contribute" (304). "A Dialogue with Simone de Beauvoir (1975)," in Betty Friedan, *It Changed My Life: Writings on the Women's Movement*, 304-316. For more on the influence Beauvoir had on Friedan, see Louis Menand, "Books as Bombs" *New Yorker*, January 24, 2011, 76-79 and Sandra Dijkstra, "Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan: The Politics of Omission," *Feminist Studies* 6, no. 2 (1980): 290-303.

radical labor politics, anti-racism, and feminism in their writings for the *Daily Worker* and the *New Masses*, among other publications.<sup>138</sup> Friedan, then working under the name Bettye Goldstein, was working at the radical news source *UE News* during this period and covered the activism of Flexner and others.<sup>139</sup> The mainstream media had even selectively picked up on some of these concerns. In addition to the *Harper's* special issue mentioned above—which included what may be the first reference to the “feminine mystique”—the early 1960s saw a slew of publications about the middle-class wife.<sup>140</sup> Indeed, one of W. W. Norton’s vice presidents noted that “one of our problems is that much is being written these days about the plight (or whatever it is) of the educated American woman; therefore, this one will have to fight its way out of a thicket.”<sup>141</sup> It seems that by the time Friedan’s book was published, the problem of the suburban housewife had already been named.

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<sup>138</sup> See Horowitz, *Betty Friedan*, 124-131.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>140</sup> *Harper's* quotes Barnard President Millicent C. McIntosh’s address to the Board of Trustees: “I think we’ve got to remember that what I think has been recently called ‘the feminine mystique’—this drive toward the kitchen and toward all of the things that a woman can absorb herself in if she only allows herself to get swamped by it—that the drive toward this has made women behave in outrageous ways.” “The Feminine Mystique,” “The American Female,” *Harper's*, 151. Horowitz lists the following publications: F. Ivan Nye and Lois W. Hoffman’s *The Employed Mother in America* (1963), Morton M. Hunt’s *Her Infinite Variety: The American Woman as Lover, Mate or Rival* and even Helen Gurley Brown’s *Sex and the Single Girl* (1962). Friedan recognizes the glut of publications herself, listing *Time*, the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *Good Housekeeping*, and CBS television among the media that covered the “problem that has no name” (Friedan, 66).

<sup>141</sup> Qtd. in Horowitz, *Betty Friedan*, 202. Other early readers commented that Friedan’s work “contributes little to understanding or solution of the problems it raises” and that it had “the ring of past history” whereas other works had “already gone far beyond” Friedan’s discussions. Qtd. in Horowitz, 202.

But Friedan named not only the problem but also the solution, or at least a possible solution that was especially appealing to midcentury Americans, both men and women alike. At the time Friedan was writing, psychologists and sociologists were calling attention to adults' need for satisfying, creative work, the kind of work that would help the worker continue to grow and that would prevent the malaise and *anomie* that had become part of the modern condition. Abraham Maslow called this process "self-actualization."<sup>142</sup> Friedan, a student of psychology as an undergraduate at Smith and later as a doctoral candidate at UC Berkeley, studied Maslow's work as well as behavioral, gestalt, and existential psychology; modifying Maslow just slightly, she described women's need for "self-realization" (Friedan, 429). The sociologists C. Wright Mills and David Riesman were also important intellectual influences.<sup>143</sup> Both of these researchers analyzed the transformation of middle-class life and labor and expressed concern over the alienation of the modern professional. Friedan and Mills collaborated on an afterschool program when Friedan was living in Rockland County and Mills was teaching at Columbia, and though Riesman earns a few more citations in *The Feminine Mystique*, it is likely that Mills's work was equally influential.<sup>144</sup> Thus, Friedan's use of the individual women's psychic health as a synecdoche for social ills is in keeping with the new sociology of work that emerged at midcentury.

This sociology of work provided more than a way of navigating the gap between the individual case and the collective experience; it gave Friedan a new way of talking about labor

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<sup>142</sup> On Maslow's version of self-actualization, see Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), especially chapter 4.

<sup>143</sup> See C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle-Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951) and David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950).

<sup>144</sup> See Horowitz, *Betty Friedan*, 168.

and freedom, two central terms for liberal feminism. Both Mills and Riesman suggested that satisfying work is crucial to the development of autonomy and, in turn, the continued prosperity of the American nation. Friedan adjusted these prescriptions to fit her cause. *The Feminine Mystique* suggests a two-pronged attack on the “the problem that has no name”: higher education for women and the development of female creativity. In the last chapter of the book, “A New Life Plan for Women,” Friedan describes how important creativity is for both men and women: “The only way for a woman, as for a man, to find herself, to know herself as a person, is by creative work of her own. There is no other way. But a job, any job, is not the answer—in fact, it can be part of the trap” (Friedan, 472). For example, Friedan warned that the “arts,” which may seem “ideal” at first, could further paralyze women. “The amateur or dilettante whose own work is not good enough for anyone to want to pay or hear or see or read does not gain real status by it in society, or real personal identity” (Friedan, 477). In short, “The picture of the happy housewife doing creative work at home—painting, sculpting, writing—is one of the semi-delusions of the feminine mystique” (Friedan, 479). For Friedan, “The key to the trap is, of course, education” (Friedan, 487), but implicit in her earlier discussion of women’s creative work is the idea that labor should be paid, that “real status” cannot be achieved by the “amateur.” Here, Friedan paraphrases—and very nearly plagiarizes—Beauvoir’s discussion of women and the arts. The combination of education, money, and time for pursuing creative interests would lead to social status and self-knowledge, which, in Friedan’s account of American women, were essentially one and the same.

If *The Feminine Mystique* struck a chord with the typical white, middle-class housewife, it struck an even more resonant chord with the women at Radcliffe. The book had significant consequences for the discussions amongst the Institute’s scholars and artists. First, Friedan’s

critique of Freud proved important for Kumin, who, in a letter to Sexton, explained how Friedan had forced her to reevaluate her perspective on psychoanalysis: “Have been all but unable to put down FEM MYSTIQUE. Am mad for the message. Yes yes yes [...] it seemed all too true looking back over 3 yrs of college freshmen I taught, the apathy, the disinterest in any kind of abstract idea, the singleminded female goal to snag a man & make babies. But the best chunk of the whole book is THE SEXUAL SOLIPSISISM OF SIGMUND FREUD [...] I’m rebelling against Freudianism in general.”<sup>145</sup> Kumin’s reevaluation of her intellectual lights mirrors the coming-to-consciousness that Friedan records in the opening pages of *The Feminine Mystique*. Disenchantment with Freudian psychology was significant, since part of the motivation behind the Radcliffe Institute was testing Freudian theories about women’s achievement. (For example, one researcher interviewed all the fellows to test her hypothesis that high-achieving women had strong father figures. Olsen characteristically objected to the very premises of the investigation and refused to be interviewed.)<sup>146</sup>

Secondly, and more importantly, Friedan articulated an agenda for the improvement of women’s conditions that was almost perfectly consonant with goals of the Bunting Institute—education, professional development, creative self-expression—but that differed in one crucial way. Whereas Mary Ingraham Bunting had described the synchronicity of homemaking and creative development in her interviews and articles, Friedan was suggesting that these two activities were ultimately opposed, that a “professional” woman could not also be a housewife.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Qtd. in Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton*, 195

<sup>146</sup> Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton*, 195.

<sup>147</sup> Indeed, Friedan took issue with Bunting directly in a footnote: “Radcliffe’s president reflects the feminine mystique when she deplors ‘the use the first college graduates made of their advanced educations. Too often and understandably, they became crusaders and reformers,

From her reading in behavioral psychology and existentialist philosophy, Friedan concluded that American women who did not work were unnaturally stunted, and that these women must “do the work that [they] are capable of doing,” which “is the mark of maturity” (Friedan, 357).<sup>148</sup> Quoting liberally from behaviorist Maslow on self-actualization, Friedan suggests “There is something less than fully human in those [...] who have never attempted the kind of creativity of which men and women are potentially capable” (Friedan, 437) and claims, “In the name of femininity, they [women] are encouraged to evade human growth” (Friedan, 437).<sup>149</sup> In this account, homemaking was an unnatural and indeed unjust life for American women. In Friedan’s words, “It is wrong for a woman, for whatever reason, to spend her days in work that is not moving as the world around her is moving, in work that does not truly use her creative energy” (Friedan, 359). Compensated, creative work was not an alternative life path but a natural

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passionate, fearless, articulate, but also, at times, loud. A stereotype of the educated women [sic] grew up in the popular mind and concurrently, a prejudice against both the stereotype and the education.’ [...] it is doubtful whether these remaining barriers will ever be overcome if even educators are going to discourage able women from becoming ‘crusaders and reformers, passionate, fearless, articulate,’—and loud enough to be heard.” Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 556 n. 11.

<sup>148</sup> In the opening paragraph of chapter 13, “The Forfeited Self,” Friedan brings together the eclectic intellectual influences that lead her to her conclusions about women’s natural development: “Scientists of human behavior have become increasingly interested in the basic human need to grow, man’s will to be all that is in him to be. Thinkers in many fields—from Bergson to Kurt Goldstein, Heinz Hartmann, Allport, Rogers, Jung, Adler, Rank, Horney, Angyal, Fromm, May, Maslow, Bettelheim, Riesman, Tillich and the existentialists—all postulate some positive growth tendency within the organism, which, from within, drives it to fuller development, to self-realization. This ‘will to power,’ ‘self-assertion,’ ‘dominance,’ or ‘autonomy,’ as it is variously called, does not imply aggression or competitive striving in the usual sense; it is the individual affirming his existence and his potentialities as a being in his own right; it is ‘the courage to be an individual’” (429).

<sup>149</sup> On Maslow’s influence on Friedan, see “Automating Feminism: Self-Actualization versus the Post-Work Society in Joanna Russ’s *The Female Man*,” Heather J. Hicks, *The Culture of Soft Work: Labor, Gender, and Race in Postmodern American Narrative* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 89-111.

development and a human right. Friedan warns, “If women do not put forth, finally, that effort to become all that they have it in them to become, they will forfeit their own humanity” (Friedan, 462). The prescription is implicit: society must provide women with the resources to pursue their creative interests.

No one was more interested in the development of a sustainable creative career than Tillie Olsen. From her earliest days as a writer, Olsen worried about the viability of a literary career. This anxiety is palpable even in her pieces of reportage for the *Partisan Review*, in which Olsen seems more concerned with working out the optimal conditions for *writers* than in writing about the optimal conditions for workers. In “The Strike,” a piece of reportage published in the September/October 1934 issue of the *Partisan Review*, Olsen focuses on the writer’s internal struggle.<sup>150</sup> The narrator, who seems to be writing under duress, accuses an unnamed editor, “You leave me only this night [...] to cleave through the gigantic events that have crashed one upon the other” (Lerner, 3), when she needs more time and space. “If I could go away for a while,” she muses, “if there were time and quiet, perhaps I could do it. All that has happened might resolve itself into order and sequence, fall into neat patterns of words” (Lerner, 3). Instead, she is “hunch[ed] over the typewriter and behind the smoke, the days whirl, confused as dreams” (Lerner, 3). Only with physical and temporal distance can the writer find perspective and “neat

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<sup>150</sup> Constance Coiner provides a thorough definition of reportage: “A form of journalism, reportage attempted to detail Depression conditions from the perspective of those acutely suffering them—the hungry, unemployed, and homeless. Reportage intended to make the reader ‘*experience*’ the event recorded. This ‘three-dimensional reporting’ eschews the presumed objectivity of traditional journalism.” Constance Coiner, *Better Red Than Dead: The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Sueur* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 27-28. Tillie Lerner, “The Strike,” *Partisan Review*, September/October 1934, 3-9. Hereafter cited in text by page number.

patterns,” which seem to form without any labor on the writer’s part. In this account, writing seems less like work than like a reprieve from work, and composition is more magic than craft.

The magic faded in the years following the publication of this piece. Olsen was occupied by paid work, family obligations, and political activism, and given her slow rate of production and her political commitments, even the most generous advances proved insufficient.<sup>151</sup> Olsen’s frustration is palpable in her journal entries from the 1950s. In one entry from 1954, she writes:

Pushed by the most elementary force—money—further more impossibly  
away from writing . . . Compulsion so fierce at night  
brutal impulse to shove Julie away from typewriter  
voices of kids calling—to be able to chop chop chop like hands from the  
lifeboat to leave me free . . . My conflict—to reconcile work with time . . . Time it  
[sic] festered and congested postponed deferred and once started up again the  
insane desire, like an aroused woman. . . . conscious of the creative abilities  
within me, more than I can encompass . . . 1953-54: I keep on dividing myself and  
flow apart, I who want to run in one river and become great. . . .<sup>152</sup>

This journal entry represents an early attempt to put into language the feelings associated with frustrated creativity. Using the same naturalist language that Bunting and Friedan share, Olsen expresses creative impulse as natural, akin to a biological response, and suggests that its suppression produces violence either against others or against the self. Although she was committed to social inequality, this journal entry also shows her belief in artistic superiority. Olsen wanted a more democratic literary world, but this did not mean she would give up her dream of being “great.”

Soon after Olsen wrote this journal entry, she gained a second chance at greatness. With the help of Arthur Foff, a creative writing instructor at San Francisco State, Olsen applied for and

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<sup>151</sup> Reid tracks meticulously financial support from Random House in the 1930s and later from Viking in the 1970s. See Reid, 120-133 and 204-234.

<sup>152</sup> Qtd. in Reid, 190.



won a Jones fellowship (later renamed for Wallace Stegner, the founder of Stanford's creative writing program) from Stanford University for the academic year 1956-1957. At Stanford, she revised the story she began in Foff's class and used for her application. Renaming it "Help Her Believe," Olsen worked under the guidance of Richard Scowcroft, who praised the story's final sentence: "This is a magnificent sentence. No writing ever gets much better than this."<sup>153</sup> The story was published in the 1957 collection of the *Best American Short Stories* under the title "I Stand Here Ironing." Requests from publishers for more writing started to come in, and Olsen found herself with a second chance at a literary career.

"I Stand Here Ironing," the story that gained Olsen access to Stanford's elite halls, makes questions of education and creative work its central themes. The story is a dramatic monologue, narrated by a working-class woman and directed at a well-meaning teacher or counselor who has offered to help the narrator's oldest daughter. According to biographer Reid, the story is loosely based on Olsen's experiences as the young and often-absent mother of Karla, her eldest child. As in "The Strike," the central problem of "I Stand Here Ironing" is the development of creative talent, but in this story, the scene is not a strike but a school. Emily, the narrator's daughter and the analogue for Olsen's own Karla, possesses a "rare gift for comedy on the stage;" her first-place prize in the school's amateur show seems to have prompted the interested teacher's initial inquiry.<sup>154</sup> The daughter's talent should be a boon, but the narrator describes Emily as "imprisoned in her difference" (Olsen, *TMAR*, 19). The language of entrapment is picked up later on the same page. Responding to the injunction, "You ought to do something about her with a

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<sup>153</sup> Tillie Olsen and Richard Scowcroft, "Engl03.1 story, includes comments," Series 1, Tillie Olsen Papers, Special Collections and Manuscripts, Stanford University.

<sup>154</sup> Tillie Olsen, "I Stand Here Ironing," in *Tell Me A Riddle* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1961), 12. Hereafter cited in text by page number.

gift like that,” the narrator laments, “but what does one do? We have left it all to her, and the gift has as often eddied inside, clogged and clotted, as been used and growing” (Olsen, *TMAR*, 19). This sentence, with its opposition between talent wasted and gifts that are still “growing,” encapsulates the drama of artistic development which frustrated and fascinated Olsen throughout her career. Emily, the adolescent artist of this story, has been stymied by circumstances: “We were poor and could not afford for her the soil of easy growth” (Olsen, *TMAR*, 20). The story ends on the same tragic note—“Let her be. So all that is in her will not bloom—but in how many does it?” (Olsen, *TMAR*, 20-21)—that is only slightly redeemed by the secular prayer at the end: “Only help her to know [...] that she is more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron” (Olsen, *TMAR*, 21). What is significant here, and what Olsen would address more directly during her time at Radcliffe, is the idea that creativity is a natural, organic part of human development. Talent demands time, space, and resources in the same way that a plant requires soil and sunlight. The story’s subtle suggestion, then, is that a just society would nurture the talents of all of its members, including and especially the silent or silenced ones.

These personal narratives turned into a political agenda when Olsen delivered (or, more accurately, composed on the spot) a talk at Radcliffe on March 15, 1963. Whereas other fellows had presented brief précis of their current research projects, Olsen did things a little differently. “Death of the Creative Process” is a veritable pastiche of quotation, meditation, analysis, and personal experience, all revolving around the capacious theme of literary silence. According to Olsen, “silence” stood for any and all instances of thwarted creativity, unfulfilled promise, or unrecognized achievement. A transcript of the seminar demonstrates the influence of Friedan’s book on Olsen’s thinking about creativity. In a preamble later cut from the published text, Olsen describes how she came up with the topic for her talk: “The reason Connie [director Constance

Smith] isn't sure just what the topic is, is because it kept changing. [...] when there was all the to-do about feminine mystiques, it was going to be *Women*, with our secretary Kathie's proviso, Men Too."<sup>155</sup> Though this is the only direct reference to *The Feminine Mystique*, we can see evidence of Friedan's influence in the way Olsen discusses the "unnatural silences" (Olsen, "Death," 3) that darken literary history. Like Friedan, Olsen defines creativity and its development as "natural" aspects of human life. The same fusion of biology and psychology that undergirds Friedan's argument about housewives supports Olsen's discussion of artists, both male and female: "Where the claims of creation cannot be primary, it means atrophy, mutilation, of the creative process" (Olsen, "Death," 11). When the talk takes a personal turn, Olsen repeats the words from her 1954 journal entry: "When again I had to leave the writing, I lost consciousness. A time of anesthesia. [...] No fever, no congestion, no festering" (Olsen, "Death," 11). Olsen recasts, in more dramatic terms, Friedan's claims about the life-sustaining power of creative work.

As the talk continues, she describes "the silent silences — where the lives never came free for the writing," and lists those who suffered from such oppression: "the mute inglorious Miltons; illiterate; barely educated; [...] Women" (Olsen, "Death," 8). Olsen follows this lament with a quotation from *A Room of One's Own* (Olsen, "Death," 9); Woolf returns several times in the pages that follow, as Olsen transitions from a generalized examination of frustrated creativity to a particular, political examination of the hardships facing women writers. "I will not repeat Virginia Woolf's *A Room of Ones Own* on womens' [sic] silence of centuries, but talk of this last century and a half in which women have begun to have voice in literature" (Olsen, "Death," 14).

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<sup>155</sup> "Death of the Creative Process," transcript of a seminar given by Tillie Olsen, Radcliffe Institute for Independent Study, 15 March 1963, Series 6, Box 42, Tillie Olsen Papers, Special Collections and Manuscripts, Stanford University. Hereafter cited in text by page number.

Olsen examines the women who have achieved success in the literary realm and argues, “nearly all [...] never married. [...] I can think of only three (George Sand, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Helen Hunt Jackson) who married and had children as young women. All had servants. In our century, until very recently, it has not been different. Most did not marry [...] or, if married, were childless. [...] [There is] a small group who had more than one child. Nearly all had help” (Olsen, “Death,” 14). This catalogue of women writers leads to Olsen’s clearest articulation of her thesis:

The power, the need to create, over and beyond reproduction, is a human capacity, native in both men and women. This is repetition. Where the gifted among women (and men) have remained mute, inglorious, or have never attained full capacity, it is because of circumstances, inner or outer, claims which oppose the needs of creation. (Olsen, “Death,” 15)

The first line of this passage echoes Friedan’s statements about “the basic human need to grow” (Friedan, 429) and “the need to grow and realize one’s full potential” (Friedan, 434). Olsen slightly modifies Friedan’s argument about “basic” humanity by suggesting that the “gifted” among us suffer more when their creativity remains undeveloped. Nevertheless, these two thinkers share an idea about creativity: that it is a basic need, that its development is a right, and that women have been unjustly deprived of their right to compensated, creative work.

This tension—between democratic rights and merited gifts—is partly resolved by public patronage institutions like the NEA and the Bunting Institute. By using public funds to select deserving citizens, the patronage institution makes more accessible the time and resources necessary to writing. Moreover, by seeking out and funding writers with dependents or without means, the institution adopts an even more democratic stance. (This will be explored more in the following chapter.) Nonetheless, the award winners retain their sheen of excellence. It is as if the

fictional Emily—and only Emily—received the school’s resources for developing her talent. This is the more just society that Olsen often imagined.

#### BREAKING SILENCES: WOMEN’S WRITING AFTER RADCLIFFE

Olsen’s talk was influential, but its influence would have been minimal—and the importance of Olsen’s own creative work minimized as well—had this informal talk not been disseminated beyond the walls of Radcliffe College. Sexton was the first to repeat, and thereby preserve, Olsen’s thesis. Sexton later recalled Olsen’s presentation as the high point of her time at Radcliffe. Looking back on the event, she told Martha White: “Tillie’s seminar probably changed my writing as much as anything. [...] I couldn’t speak afterward, I was in a state of shock. Tillie’s seminar went way overtime, but if anyone had stopped her, I would have chopped their head off.”<sup>156</sup> Sexton borrowed Olsen’s notes and retyped them for her files. For most of her career, Sexton had looked up to male writers: John Holmes, W. D. Snodgrass, Robert Lowell, Anthony Hecht, and even her nemesis James Dickey. (Maxine Kumin is a significant exception, though Kumin was more peer than mentor.) Olsen, about twenty years Sexton’s senior, provided a model of mature female artistry, despite the fact that Sexton was, and would continue to be, the more prolific writer.

In the years following her time at Radcliffe with Olsen, Sexton related ambivalently to politics in general and to feminist politics in particular. At times, she seemed quite politically conscious, such as when she participated in several “read-ins” against the Vietnam War.<sup>157</sup> At other moments, however, Sexton shied away from expressing political allegiance or endorsing

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<sup>156</sup> Qtd. in Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton*, 198.

<sup>157</sup> See Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton*, 295-6.

feminist views. In an interview with Patricia Marx from 1965, Sexton repeatedly backs away from feminist positions; when Marx asked if it was hard to be “a woman and a creative artist,” Sexton replied, “I think they are very closely allied. I don’t think it’s difficult at all.”<sup>158</sup> When asked explicitly about the “feminine mystique” and its relevance to the “problems of the modern woman,” Sexton demurred, “Maybe modern woman is more conscious now, more thinking. I can’t tell. Sometimes I feel like another creature, hardly a woman [...] I can’t be a modern woman[.]”<sup>159</sup> She was even more critical of the feminist movement—or at least the academic manifestation of the movement—in an interview with Elaine Showalter and Carol Smith two years later. “I hate the way I’m anthologized in women’s lib anthologies,” she declared. “They cull out the ‘hate men’ poems, and leave nothing else. They show only one little aspect of me. Naturally, there are times I hate men, who wouldn’t? But there are times I love them. The feminists are doing themselves a disservice to show just this.”<sup>160</sup> (Middlebrook does well to remind us that Sexton was not at her most lucid during this particular conversation.<sup>161</sup>)

If her political statements about women were conflicted, her poetry about *being* a woman was remarkably candid. Like Lowell and the other “confessional” poets, Sexton mined her most personal and private experiences for material for her poetry. She defended this technique most cogently in “For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further,” from *Bedlam*:

I tapped my own head;  
it was glass, an inverted bowl.

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<sup>158</sup> Anne Sexton, interview with Patricia Marx, in Steven E. Colburn, ed., *No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews, and Prose*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), 77.

<sup>159</sup> Sexton, interview with Patricia Marx, *No Evil Star*, 78.

<sup>160</sup> Anne Sexton, conversation with Maxine Kumin, Elaine Showalter, and Carol Smith, *No Evil Star*, 179.

<sup>161</sup> Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton*, 392.

It is a small thing  
to rage in your own bowl.  
At first it was private.  
Then it was more than myself;  
it was you, or your house  
or your kitchen.

The movement in this passage from “own” to “your,” from “private” to “more,” prefigures the feminist axiom that the “personal is political” and suggests that the most private experience can be a public concern.

As critics have noted, Sexton is largely responsible for bringing women’s private experiences into the literary public sphere. In *All My Pretty Ones* (1962), the collection that followed *Bedlam*, Sexton wrote about her abortion (“The Abortion,” “With Mercy for the Greedy”), her experiences as a mother (“The Fortress,” written while at Radcliffe), and her role as a housewife (“Housewife”). *Live or Die* (1966), the Pulitzer-winning collection she began at Radcliffe, includes “Menstruation at Forty,” an unprecedented subject for poetry, and later collections included more poems about her aging body (“In Celebration of My Uterus” and “The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator” in *Love Poems*). As Katha Pollitt wrote in her review of *That Awful Rowing*, Sexton’s last and posthumously-published collection, “thanks largely to Sexton’s own influence, it is not longer shocking for a woman to write poems about menstruation or her uterus or abortion—or, for that matter, about erotic joy, of which Sexton also had her share. No doubt many critics still wince in private at women poets who claim for themselves the sexual frankness long ago claimed by their brothers, but they are much less likely to wince in print, and when they do they look squeamish rather than authoritative.”<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Katha Pollitt, “That Awful Rowing,” in Linda Wagner-Martin, ed., *Critical Essays on Anne Sexton* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1989), 67. Previously published as Katha Pollitt, “That Awful Rowing,” *Nation*, November 21, 1981, 533-37.

In contrast to Sexton, Olsen dedicated the rest of her career to feminist political action. Her polemical positions achieved broader publicity when her Radcliffe talk was published in *Harper's* in October 1965, in the same two-part supplement on "The Writer's Life" that contained Dempsey's analysis of the foundations. Coming off over three years of fellowship funding with little to show for it, Olsen attempted to placate Malcolm Cowley, her former teacher and would-be editor, and Viking Press by suggesting publication of "Death of the Creative Process." The piece she submitted to *Harper's* was little more than a transcript of her circuitous talk and in need of massive revisions, most of which involved crafting full sentences out of Olsen's fragmented prose and excising some of her catalogues and quotations.<sup>163</sup> *Harper's* re-titled the piece "Silences: When Writers Don't Write." (When she received a copy for her files, Olsen added the adjective "unnatural" to the title.)<sup>164</sup> Even without the preamble from her Radcliffe talk, the agenda becomes clear right away:

These are not *natural* silences, what Keats called *agonie ennuyeuse* (the tedious agony), that necessary time for renewal, lying fallow, gestation, in the natural cycle of creation. The silences I speak of here are unnatural; the unnatural thwarting of what struggles to come into being, but cannot. In the old, the obvious parallels: when the seed strikes stone; the soil will not sustain; the spring is false; the time is drought or blight or infestation; the frost comes premature.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> On revisions see Reid, 229-232.

<sup>164</sup> "Silences: When Writers Don't Write," "The Writer's Life," a special issue, *Harper's*, October 1965, 142-161, Series 6, Tillie Olsen Papers, Special Collections and Manuscripts, Stanford University. Olsen, ever revising, made notes in the margins of the published piece. Most of these involved adding quotations or examples (the right-hand margin of page 154 is a vertical list of proper names). She also changed gendered language (in discussing the writer's struggle, "his own work" became "their own work") and crossed out any words that would qualify her claims (e.g., the first word in the sentence "Nearly all had household help").

<sup>165</sup> "Silences," *Harper's*, 153.



We hear in these lines echoes from Olsen's fiction—Emily, in “I Stand Here Ironing,” was not afforded “the soil of easy growth” (Olsen, *TMAR*, 20)—as well as from Mary Bunting's *Times* editorial, in which women are likened to “plants kept under conditions that encourage vegetative growth but do not permit flowering[.]” This metaphorical language not only portrays creative growth as innate or “natural” but also indicts the circumstances that prevent such growth. Even as they focused on the career of the individual woman, these women—Bunting, Friedan, and Olsen—shifted the terms of discussion from the nature of women to the nature of American society, from flower to soil.

“Silences” represented Olsen's first publication since her award-winning story, and it determined the conditions for much of the writing and speeches she produced in the decades to come. With the publication of *Silences* (1978), a scrapbook-style collection of transcripts and notes from public talks that included the *Harper's* piece, Olsen became a strong influence on American letters and on American feminist literature and criticism in particular.<sup>166</sup> The central theme of *Silences* is lost writing. For Olsen, this loss appears in various forms: it may be the result of voluntary or involuntary censorship or self-censorship (“Silences in Literature”), discriminatory distribution of women's writing in college syllabuses (“One Out of Twelve: Writers Who Are Women In Our Century”), or the forces of historical amnesia (“Rebecca Harding Davis: Her Life and Times,” an afterword to the reprinting of the nineteenth-century novella). Margaret Atwood praised the “powerful” book in the *New York Times* and elevated Olsen's status among her peers: “Among women writers in the United States, ‘respect’ is too

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<sup>166</sup> Tillie Olsen, *Silences* (1978; New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2003). Hereafter cited in text by page number.

pale a word: ‘reverence is more like it.’<sup>167</sup> Shelley Fisher Fishkin puts the point succinctly in her introduction to the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of the book version of “Silences”: “*Silences* changed what we read in the academy, what we write, and what we count; it also gave us some important tools to understand and address many of the literary, social, economic and political silencings of the present and the potential silencings of the future.”<sup>168</sup> In the 1970s and 1980s, Olsen was in great demand as a lecturer, speaking passionately and frequently about her own experience with silence. A charismatic if eccentric speaker, Olsen was a key influence in feminist critical praxis and was something of a celebrity within feminist circles; San Francisco even celebrated “Tillie Olsen Day” in 1981. Until her death in 2007, Olsen continued to advocate for “those whose waking hours are all struggle for existence; the barely educated; the illiterate; women” (Olsen, *Silences*, 10).

The death of a writer invites us to examine her career, to decide whether she succeeded and on what terms. Robert Lowell, speaking on the occasion of Sexton’s death, remarked, “Unlike Snodgrass and Sylvia Plath, she [Sexton] was an amateur. I am not sure what I mean by

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<sup>167</sup> Margaret Atwood, “Obstacle Course,” *The Critical Response to Tillie Olsen*, ed. Kay Hoyle Nelson and Nancy Huse (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 250-251.

<sup>168</sup> Shelley Fisher Fishkin, “Reading, Writing and Arithmetic: The Lessons *Silences* Has Taught Us,” introduction to *Silences*, by Tillie Olsen. Fisher Fishkin argues, “Olsen’s writing on silence and silencing was the ‘subtext’ for Annette Kolodny’s reinterpretation of the literary treatment of the American West in her book, *The Land Before Her* (Kolodny 1988, 1984), and for Norma Alarcón’s revision in *This Bridge Called My Back* of the cultural significance of the figure of ‘La Malinche’ (Alarcón 1988, 1983). It helped inspire Elaine Hedges’s recovery and reinterpretation of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* as a text intimately concerned with the silences inscribed by turn-of-the-century gender relations (Hedges 1988, 1973)” (xxi). The blurbs on the back cover of the anniversary edition support this argument for Olsen’s widespread influence; writers quoted include Maxine Hong Kingston, Sandra Cisneros, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, and Adrienne Rich.

this.”<sup>169</sup> Lowell may have been more attuned to the changing discourse around professionalism than he realized, even if his estimation of Sexton’s talent is up for debate. As this essay has shown, a writer’s “professional” identity was not directly tied to her success on the market; in this case, Sexton was already selling more poems than Plath during those early years under Lowell’s guidance. Professionalism, then, meant something more than popularity or financial success (though it meant these things as well). For Sexton, Olsen, and the women at Radcliffe—as well as for Friedan and Beauvoir—the label “professional” was emancipatory and equalizing; it granted women financial independence as well as a kind of humanity that housewifery alone precluded. The Bunting Institute recognized the strange combination of symbolic and material support that women needed in order to “flower,” and it set in motion the conditions that changed not only the careers of individual writers but also the direction of the feminist movement inside and outside the academy.

### Chapter Three

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<sup>169</sup> Robert Lowell, “Anne Sexton,” in *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale*, ed. Steven Colburn (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1988), 24. Previously published as Robert Lowell, “Anne Sexton,” *The Artist and Her Critics*, ed. J. D. McClatchy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978).

## Carver, Class, and the Work of the Professional Writer

*How much do writers make? she said  
first off  
she's never met a writer  
before  
Not much I said  
they have to do other things as well  
Like what? she said  
Like working in mills I said  
sweeping floors teaching school  
picking fruit  
whatnot  
all kinds of things I said  
In my country she said  
someone who has been to college  
would never sweep floors  
Well that's just when they're starting out I said  
all writers make lots of money*  
-Raymond Carver, "For Semra, With Martial Vigor"<sup>170</sup>

*"In the ideal world, if this were just a peaceable kingdom, writers wouldn't have to work at all.  
They'd just get a check in the mail every month."*  
-Carver to Robert Pope and Lisa McElhinny, 1982

Like many of Raymond Carver's stories, "Collectors" is about work: finding it, keeping it, losing it, or avoiding it. "I was out of work," admits the narrator at the story's opening, "But any day I expected to hear from up north."<sup>171</sup> The narrator is lying on the sofa, listening to the rain and for the footsteps of the mailman, when a knock at the door disrupts his reverie. Fearing bill collectors he avoids answering; "You can't be too careful," he explains, "if you're out of work and you get notices in the mail or else pushed under your door" (Carver, *WYPBQP*, 102). The narrator finally caves to the persistent knocking of a man who turns out to be a door-to-door

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<sup>170</sup> Raymond Carver, *Fires: Essays, Poems, Stories* (Santa Barbara: Capra Press, 1983), 48. Hereafter cited in text by page number.

<sup>171</sup> Raymond Carver, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976; rpt. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1991), 102. Hereafter cited in text by page number.

salesman. “Mrs. Slater is a winner” (Carver, *WYBPQP*, 103), the salesman declares, and he enters the house to show off the prize, despite the narrator’s protestation that “Mrs. Slater doesn’t live here” (Carver, *WYBPQP*, 103). The prize is a vacuum cleaner, which the salesman proceeds to show off by cleaning the apartment until he is “breathing hard” (Carver, *WYBPQP*, 109), offering a card with the prizewinner’s signature as proof: “Mrs. Slater is a winner. No strings” (Carver, *WYBPQP*, 105). Eventually, the narrator convinces the salesman of his error, and the latter exits into the rain. The story ends, as many of Carver’s stories do, abruptly and without resolution. We don’t know the reason for the salesman’s error, nor do we know the outcome of the narrator’s job prospects, but we have the sense that this encounter on a rainy afternoon between two men—one out of work, one working all too hard—holds some kind of eerie significance.

In both its form and its theme, “Collectors” resembles many of the other stories in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, Carver’s first short story collection, which was published in 1976. Throughout the volume, various forms of labor are set over and against each other: domestic labor and wage labor (“Put Yourself in My Shoes”); teaching and studying (“Night School,” “The Student’s Wife”); the service economy and the manufacturing sector (“Fat,” “What’s In Alaska?”). “Collectors,” engages with the theme of work in several ways, such as by inverting traditional gender roles and replacing an absent housewife with an intrepid salesman. But there is another significant reversal as well: instead of being called on to pay his debts (a common event in Carver stories), the narrator finds himself to be the recipient of a prize, one that comes “No strings” attached. Carver knew something about winning prizes of this nature. In 1970, Carver, “out of work” himself, won the first of two NEA Creative Writing Fellowships; according to Carver, the first of these fellowships changed the course of his writing career.

Unlike the prize delivered in “Collectors,” Carver’s grant was not unwanted, nor was it undeserved, and yet the similarities between the unemployed narrator of “Collectors” and the unemployed author of the story deserve our attention. Both spend their days at home instead of in an office, both are excellent observers, both avoid distractions (bill collectors and children, respectively), and both look like they are not doing much of anything at all. In short, the story raises questions about what constitutes work and how such work should be rewarded, questions that Carver reflected on as his status changed over the years, from blue-collar-worker to white-collar-worker to professional writer and teacher. Many of the stories in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, “Collectors” included, can be read as allegories of artistic production, in which Carver tries to work out what constitutes his real work and what it means to be a “professional writer.” These self-reflexive stories met with critical success (the volume was short-listed for the National Book Award), and though *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* sold fewer than 5,000 copies, its impact on Carver’s career went beyond financial gain. The story of Carver’s short stories demonstrates the complex relationship between labor, capital, and value for the writer working in post-1965 America, the era of state patronage.

Carver is just one of the many writers rewarded by the NEA Literature Program, but his case proves especially useful to a consideration of the ways in which increased reliance on fellowship funding, and especially on federal funding, changed the concept of the “professional” artist in the second-half of the twentieth century. As we saw in the previous chapter, artistic professionalism often has an oblique relationship to an artist’s earning potential: the fellowships provided by the Bunting Institute at Radcliffe College validated women’s careers, even though the financial support the fellowships provided paled in comparison to the salaries that these women’s husbands brought home. Nonetheless, as Anne Sexton explained, the fellowship served

as a “status symbol,” one that denoted “respect.”<sup>172</sup> For Carver, a writer without Sexton’s economic advantages, the situation was somewhat different: a fellowship’s financial support was just as valuable as its social prestige, though these things were certainly intertwined. A beneficiary of the NEA’s short-lived Discovery Grants program, a program that ran from 1967-1971 and that was designed to fund “gifted, financially needy, unknown writers,” Carver’s career demonstrates how state funding enabled a new demographic of citizens—what Carver once called the “desperate class”—to earn their living as artists.<sup>173</sup> And Carver’s fiction, which allegorizes this transformation and the author’s subsequent ascent up the socio-economic ladder, illustrates the ways in which these institutional changes influenced ideas about artists and artistic production.

This chapter reads several of Carver’s stories about working artists—what we might call Carver’s *künstlerromane*—with the aim of showing how his ideas about creative work and about literary professionalism changed as a result of state patronage. Most of these stories are drawn from Carver’s first collection, a work of state-funded fiction. Composed over the course of a decade, the stories in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* register Carver’s changing attitudes towards work, creativity, and the professionalization of the writing life. I argue that stories that were composed prior to receiving the NEA grant present more skeptical perspectives on the idea of earning a living through art—in brief, they portray wage labor and artistic labor as diametrically opposed activities—whereas the stories composed with the support of the grant portray a more complex and ambivalent relationship between writing and other professional endeavors. Put simply, receiving federal aid made Carver uneasy about his newfound identity as

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<sup>172</sup> Qtd. in Diane Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton*, 152.

<sup>173</sup> Amy Stoll, “The NEA Literature Fellowships Turn Forty: An Introduction,” 5-6.

a professional artist. Carver's changing ideas about his creative work, and his changing relationship to the working-class life, become clearer when compared to the career of another working-class writer, Dagoberto Gilb, who also received an NEA fellowship and who also composed self-referential stories about writers and workers, some of whom reflect on their own class status. The ambivalence displayed by Carver and Gilb, upwardly mobile writers, is a force that shapes their self-reflexive fiction and should, in turn, shape our ideas about the professional writing life in the postwar era.

## UNDERSTANDING A WRITER'S WORK: TOWARDS A HISTORY OF LITERARY PROFESSIONALISM

As discussed in the introduction, the NEA was established for a number of reasons, ranging from the ongoing cultural competition between the Soviet Union (some of it conducted through the CCF) to President Lyndon Johnson's desire to win over East Coast liberals who objected to his Vietnam policy. The effects of the NEA on artistic production were similarly varied, but a survey conducted by the NEA Literature Program shows that during the first decade of the fellowship program, one effect overrode all the others, at least as far as writers themselves were concerned. An internal memo observes, "the economic effect of receiving a fellowship was, far and away, the most important aspect of it—not having to worry, at least temporarily, about pressing debts, being able to get away from a steady job for a few weeks, the ability to travel for at least a brief period of time [...] Temporary freedom from a stultifying and paralyzing form of economic bondage."<sup>174</sup> Indeed, writer after writer asks for "more money," "more money to the

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<sup>174</sup> Leonard Randolph, "Literature Program Follow-Up on Creative Writing Fellowships," Subject Files of Mary Ann Tighe, Deputy Chairman for Programs, 1973-1981, Box 13, RNEA, National Archives II, College Park, MD. The survey was mailed to writers who received grants



grantees,” and “more dollars.”<sup>175</sup> Second to their financial concerns, but very much related to them, is respondents’ desire for professional prestige; they express gratitude to the granting committee for providing it. “I feel much more like a professional,” writes one, “It reinforced feelings of professionalism,” says another. A third clarified: “I mean I began to no longer be treated as a ‘hobbyist.’”<sup>176</sup> This distinction between amateur and professional, so salient for a writer like Anne Sexton, was, in some ways, even more crucial for Carver, not only because of his acute financial worries but also because he had competing professional identities—the professional identities by which he earned a living—that overshadowed his identity as a writer. Thus, we often find Carver characters working hard at jobs that pay the bills (or that fall just short of paying the bills). These same jobs, however, also prevent characters from pursuing their artistic and intellectual work, whether that work is studying, reading, or writing.

I am not the first to note Carver’s interest in (and ambivalence about) work of all kinds; it is a topic that arises again and again in studies of his fiction. An inquiry into Carver’s take on work is especially timely, since the topic of work is one that has received renewed critical interest during the recent years of economic recession, a time when salaried employment—not to mention academic appointments—has become increasingly elusive and precarious. The recent *PMLA* special issue on “Work” is a testament to this renewed interest. The collection addresses

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during the years 1972-1976, the first years that the NEA eliminated any program (including the Discovery Grants program) that awarded grants based on something other than merit, such as financial need. Nonetheless, writers responded by calling attention to their economic precariousness and expressing gratitude for the financial assistance as well as a desire for increased funds.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

forms of intellectual labor and the relationship between such labor and other forms of work, but artistic labor remains a largely absent.<sup>177</sup>

This is not to say that the work of writing itself has been entirely ignored within literary studies. To the contrary, over the last two decades, several scholars have made important interventions in the field of work studies by analyzing how writers who wrote about work or about the working class understood their professional and ethical relationship to their subjects of study. Nicholas Bromwell offers an analysis of antebellum writers who represented work, both the work of the laboring classes as well as their own. “For about three decades, roughly between 1830 and 1860,” Bromwell explains, “politics and aesthetics converged for the American writers in two questions: what is the nature of my work as a writer and what should be the relation of that work to the work performed by others? [...] They [these questions] required the writer to think of himself or herself not just as a producer who is located in the marketplace, but as a worker who occupies the realm of necessity in which so many readers labor.”<sup>178</sup> Cindy Weinstein, also studying the nineteenth-century, proposes that allegory in antebellum fiction brings together various forms of work, both inside and outside the text. Allegory, according to Weinstein, is the literary mode that foregrounds “the literal work [...] that a fictional character does in a text, the authorial work that goes into making a fictional character, the narrator’s/reader’s work in solving the puzzle of [a character’s] identity, and last the relation

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<sup>177</sup> “Work,” a special issue, *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 127, no. 4 (2012). For essays on the relationship between academic labor and other forms of work, see, among others, Margaret Ferguson, “The Letter of Recommendation as Strange Work” (954-962), Walter Benn Michaels, “Dude, Where’s My Job” (1006-1009), and Celeste Langan, “‘Education is Our Occupation’” (1010-1015).

<sup>178</sup> Nicholas K. Bromwell, *By the Sweat of the Brow: Literature and Labor in Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 2, 15.

between work in a literary text and work in a market economy.”<sup>179</sup> Laura Hapke’s encyclopedic *Labor’s Text: The Worker in American Fiction* (2001) provides an important overview of the way representations of workers have changed over time, from the 1840s to the 1990s. In tracking these changes, Hapke hopes to “recover these worker representations” and to call attention to working-class writers, who are often overlooked during the composition of American literary histories.<sup>180</sup> Finally, no overview of work studies would be complete without acknowledging the work of Michael Denning who, in *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (1996), argues that Depression-era cultural production profoundly influenced American fiction and film that appeared in its wake.<sup>181</sup>

In different ways, then, all of the above monographs consider how the work performed by the writer intersects with cultural ideas about work, which is often defined as manual labor. None of them, however, investigates how this relationship changes when the writer’s work is professionalized. Both Christopher Wilson and Michael Szalay attend to just this phenomenon, the creation of the “professional” writer, in their respective studies of the progressive era and the New Deal era. Wilson, in *The Labor of Words: Literary Professionalism in the Progressive Era* (1985), explains how the mass market’s development after 1885 inspired the “genesis of the era’s dominant professional style, the vocational manner I call ‘popular naturalism.’”<sup>182</sup> Looking

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<sup>179</sup> Cindy Weinstein, *The Literature of Labor and the Labors of Literature: Allegory in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 5.

<sup>180</sup> Laura Hapke, *Labor’s Text: The Worker in American Fiction* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001).

<sup>181</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1996).

<sup>182</sup> Wilson, *Labor of Words*, xi.

at writers like Frank Norris and Jack London, Wilson explains how a robust publishing industry allowed writers to break free from Romantic ideas about creative work, namely that such work was not really work at all but was rather the easy fruits of inspiration, divine or otherwise. In Wilson's account, this professionalization both followed from and preserved a writer's freedom from patronage: "The new publishing establishments provided new financial resources for American authors, freed writers from the occasional restraints of patronage, allowed time for extensive research, and widely expanded available audiences. As a consequence of these changes, it was said, literary endeavor could be cut loose from its Romantic, aristocratic, or part-time moorings and reestablished in a cult of professional expertise and democratic activism."<sup>183</sup> For Szalay, however, government patronage was precisely the thing that allowed writers of the 1930s and 1940s to become professionals. For Szalay, "the only thing that separated the amateur from the professional artist was a wage itself."<sup>184</sup> These two studies—which triangulate patronage, the market, and the writer's self-conception in order to flesh out the idea of the "professional" writer—serve as important precedents for the project I pursue here. In what follows, I advance these analyses of American literary professionalism by following the evolution of this concept in the postwar period, a time when the U.S. government, by providing two-year stipends without any stipulations or expectations, granted a writer professional status.

The arrival of the U.S. government's patronage program coincided with significant changes in American higher education, changes that brought a new demographic of Americans into contact with literary culture that had previously been restricted to elites. In 1965, the same year that Johnson established the NEA, he also signed into law the Higher Education Act, which

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>184</sup> Szalay, *New Deal Modernism*, 69.

significantly increased the scholarships and loans the government would provide to college students; it also increased the amount of federal money that went to universities. Signing the bill, Johnson observed, “In the next school year alone, 140,000 young men and women will be enrolled in college who, but for the provisions of this bill, would never have gone past high school. We will reap the rewards of their wiser citizenship and their greater productivity for decades to come.”<sup>185</sup> Later in his speech, he remarked, “From this act will also come a new partnership between campus and community, turning the ivory towers of learning into the allies of a better life in our cities.”<sup>186</sup> The act built on the advances made by the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act (better known as the G. I. Bill) of 1944, which, among other things, provided veterans with money to attend college. Thanks to these two pieces of legislation, the composition of the university classroom radically changed, and more and more students from working-class backgrounds, students like Raymond Carver, found themselves with both the education and the motivation to produce art of their own.

Thus, scholars participating in the growing field of work studies, especially those who are interested in the postwar period, must address the unique position of the working-class writer, who exists at the intersection of the categories artist and worker. Of the studies mentioned above, only Hapke studies the working-class writer, while others go to great (and valid) efforts to differentiate the position of the writer from the position of the worker that the writer depicts in his fiction. The absence of the working-class writer from these studies is, perhaps, an oversight

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<sup>185</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, “Remarks at Southwest Texas State College Upon Signing the Higher Education Act of 1965” *The LBJ Presidential Library Media Gallery*, [http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/Johnson/lbjforkids/edu\\_whca370-text.shtm](http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/Johnson/lbjforkids/edu_whca370-text.shtm).

<sup>186</sup> Ibid. In his invocation of the ivory tower, we hear echoes of the populist overtones from his remarks upon signing the NEA into law, when he remarked, “The arts and humanities belong to the people, for it is, after all, the people who created them” (qtd. in Taylor and Barresi, *The Arts at a New Frontier*, 40).

consistent with the historical conditions of literary production; prior to the development of a strong and stable state patronage system in America, the writers who could make their livings through writing alone were often writers with independent means. But as changes in educational and governmental institutions brought more and more working-class and middle-class individuals into contact with the forms of culture previously reserved for the economic elite, a new demographic of citizens began to conceive of themselves as potential professional artistic producers. Carver was one of them.

### CARVER, CLASS, AND THE ECONOMICS OF LITERARY SUCCESS

Carver is among this new class of writers who, over the course of his life, went from earning a living through physical labor to supporting himself through creative and intellectual labor; this is a transition thematized in his fiction. Though it is now a critical commonplace to say that Carver is a representative author of the American working class—“a chronicler of blue-collar despair” in the words of one reviewer—there are surprisingly few critical accounts that theorize the relationship between the representation of work, specifically creative work, and class in Carver’s fiction.<sup>187</sup> (Ben Harker’s recent essay is a notable exception to this trend.)<sup>188</sup> We

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<sup>187</sup> The epithet derives from Bruce Weber’s “Raymond Carver: A Chronicler of Blue-Collar Despair,” *New York Times Magazine*, 24 June 1984, 36-38. Harker analyzes Carver’s poems, essays, and interviews “as textual spaces negotiating the contradictory class location of a distinguished professional writer synonymous with working-class settings” in the context of Fordism and the rise of the professional-managerial class.

<sup>188</sup> See Harker, “‘To be there, inside, and not to be there’: Raymond Carver and Class,” *Textual Practice* 21, no. 4 (2007): 715-736. For accounts of working-class culture of Carver’s fiction, see Bill Mullen, “A Subtle Spectacle: Televisual Culture in the Short Stories of Raymond Carver,” *Critique* 39, no. 2 (1998): 99-114, and Barbara Henning, “Minimalism and the American Dream: ‘Shiloh’ by Bobbie Ann Mason and ‘Preservation’ by Raymond Carver,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 35, no. 4 (1989): 689-698.

might speculate that the critical reluctance to attend to class is, in part, a response to class-based condemnations of Carver's fiction in the 1980s. Critics including Madison Smartt Bell and John W. Aldridge faulted Carver for bringing what they saw as the unseemly elements of mass culture—television, magazines, the *Reader's Digest*—into the literary world.<sup>189</sup> Subsequent critics have corrected for this critical trend by ignoring the elements of class represented in Carver's work and by instead calling attention to the formal innovation and artistry of the short fiction.<sup>190</sup> In contrast to these divergent critical trends, Mark McGurl describes Carver as a “lower-middle class modernist” and suggests that Carver's minimalist style reflects the writer's class status and the “shame” he might have felt when entering an intellectual world that was unfamiliar.<sup>191</sup> The style also represents the author's displays of craftsmanship, which McGurl understands as “the utopian return of unalienated labor” in the bureaucratic age.<sup>192</sup>

But Carver's relationship to his literary labor is less straightforward than this last interpretation might lead us to expect. His ambivalence about his work, class status, and compensation comes into focus when we shift the source of Carver's patronage from the university to the state. Carver was twice the direct beneficiary of grants, first in 1970 and then

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<sup>189</sup> See Madison Bell, “Less is Less: The Dwindling American Short Story,” *Harper's* (April 1986): 4-9, and John W. Aldridge, *Talents and Technicians: Literary Chic and the New Assembly-Line Fiction* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992).

<sup>190</sup> For representatives of this approach, see Ayala Amir, *The Visual Poetics of Raymond Carver* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), who argues, “while Carver's penetrating stories seem at first glance to be slices of life, torn from reality and put into words very simply, even casually, the failure of his many epigones has shown that precise transcriptions alone cannot compare to the master's highly stylized stories” (xiii) and Arthur F. Bethea, *Technique and Sensibility in the Fiction and Poetry of Raymond Carver* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>191</sup> McGurl, *The Program Era*, 275, 286.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.

again in 1980, but even before the NEA Literature Program took note of him as an individual, it sustained Carver's work indirectly by providing a grant to George Hitchcock, a Bay Area literary icon and the editor of *kayak*. In 1969, the NEA offered Hitchcock a \$10,000 grant to advance the "cause of unknown, obscure, or difficult writers," an edict that Hitchcock took to mean publishing monographs as well as his "little magazine."<sup>193</sup> Among these monographs was Carver's poetry collection *Winter Insomnia*; it was his first publication with a non-academic press. (His first collection of poems, *Near Klamath*, had been published by the English Club of Sacramento State College, where Carver was in charge of the literary magazine.<sup>194</sup>) In March of 1970, Jay Thurston, editor of *Perspective* in St. Louis who was, at that moment, reviewing several of Carver's stories for publication, recommended Carver for an NEA Discovery award; the grant provided the financial support Carver needed to finish his first story collection.<sup>195</sup>

The most lucrative grant, though, was a private one, the Mildred and Harold Strauss "Livings" award, which he received in 1983. I bring it up here because it inspired some of Carver's most direct and lucid statements about white-collar work as well as about the ecology of literary patronage in postwar America. The renewable, tax-free, five-year award, which gave

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<sup>193</sup> Qtd. in Carol Sklenicka, *Raymond Carver: A Writer's Life* (New York: Scribner, 2010), 173. On the NEA's systematic and sustained support for the "little magazines," see the introduction to this dissertation.

<sup>194</sup> Sklenicka, *Raymond Carver*, 144-5.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 182. Carver's first wife, Maryann Burk Carver, remembers the moment: "What impressed the kids was that this was indeed *news*. The local radio station most people in San Jose listened to had a newscast every half hour. The announcer read off the AP wire. So, every half hour that day you'd hear: 'Local poet and fiction writer, Raymond Carver, was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts grant for demonstrating outstanding excellence in his chosen field.' Which the station underscored with a sound effect of a twenty-one-gun salute." Maryann Burk Carver, *What It Used To Be Like: A Portrait of My Marriage to Raymond Carver* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006), 234.



him \$35,000, allowed him to quit teaching and move back West. Asked about the transition away from teaching, Carver replied, “Teaching doesn’t inspire me. I’m not getting ideas from my teaching or ideas from my students. But it pays the rent and provides me with a good living. For too many years I worried about how I was going to make the next month’s rent, or what would happen if my kids got sick. [...] It’s just no way to live at all.”<sup>196</sup> For Carver, teaching was just another way to pay the bills, another distraction from writing. “Most working novelists don’t make any money,” he said in the same interview, “When you come right down to it, those aren’t very good wages. That’s why most serious writers have to do other things to earn a living—whether it’s teaching, or being vice president of an insurance company, or working six months out of the year in logging camps and spending the rest of the time writing.”<sup>197</sup> As the parataxis in this passage implies, all of these forms of labor were of a piece for Carver, and they were fundamentally different from creative work. “In the ideal world,” he mused, “if this were just a peaceable kingdom, writers wouldn’t have to work at all. They’d just get a check in the mail every month.”<sup>198</sup> This peaceable kingdom wasn’t just a fantasy: the NEA created Carver’s ideal world, albeit only for two years at a time, when it mailed Carver and other chosen recipients their stipends. This is the kind of support that Carver suggests a writer needs, something closer to a salary than a reward.

These statements from Carver the professional writer represent a significant change from Carver’s earliest ideas about literary professionalism. Carver’s artistic ambitions were first

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<sup>196</sup> Robert Pope and Lisa McElhinny, “Raymond Carver Speaking” in *Conversations with Raymond Carver*, ed. Marshall Bruce Gentry and William L. Stull (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), 12.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 13.

shaped by a correspondence course that was explicit about the financial rewards available to writers. “Authorship Is a Big, Lucrative Field,” promised the Palmer Institute of Authorship, a Hollywood-based program that, for a small fee, offered writing instruction and assignments.<sup>199</sup> The course, which Carver completed at sixteen, emphasized both the cultural prestige and the financial promise of the writing profession, advertising it as “a profession that enjoys the respect and esteem of all classes of people” and one that will “pay the writer handsomely[.]”<sup>200</sup> What is remarkable about the Palmer Institute, besides its overly optimistic take on the money to be made in the book business, is its radically democratic vision of both the writer and the reading public (the latter represented by the “millions of dollars [...] spent by the John Smiths and Jane Does all over the world”).<sup>201</sup> The course insists that anyone—rich or poor, educated or not—can become a writer; all that is needed is “A sincere INTEREST in the work” and the “Willingness to WORK and STUDY,” in addition to sufficient understanding of English to write a personal letter.<sup>202</sup> “Why Not You Too?” the brochure asks, a question that echoes the language of possibility that permeates much of the Institute’s materials. As Carver biographer Carol Sklenicka puts it, “The Palmer course hammered on two themes: anyone who worked hard enough and followed the lessons in order and completely could become a professional writer. And a story was finished when it was ready to ‘sell.’”<sup>203</sup> From this perspective, writing looks much like other forms of skilled labor, through which one turns out a marketable product, valuable precisely because of

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<sup>199</sup> Qtd. in Sklenicka, 39.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> Sklenicka, *Raymond Carver*, 40.

the market and in terms of its market value. The market, then, is the great democratizing force, one that enables any individual—“Why Not You, Too?”—to join the ranks of the artistic elite.

Reflecting on the Institute’s influence on him years later, Carver minimized its significance and portrayed it as a useless, *pro forma* exercise. A typescript from a 1983 *Paris Review* interview contains some illuminating redacted passages:

I stayed with it for a few months. Then **maybe** I got bored. I stopped doing **the work**. My folks ~~badgered me for a while then they~~ stopped making the payments. Pretty soon a letter arrived from the Palmer Institute telling me that if I paid them in full, I could still get the certification **of completion**. This seemed **more than fair** ~~good idea at the time. Never tell when such a diploma might come in handy!~~ Somehow I talked my folks into paying the rest of the money and in due time I got the **certificate** (struck: ~~diploma~~) and hung it up on my bedroom wall. (struck: ~~My parents had never expected anything to come of it anyway. And they were right. Nothing did. It was done because it was something my folks thought they had to do for me, like have filings put in my teeth.~~) **All through high school** it was assumed that I’d graduate and go to work at the sawmill. For a long time I wanted to **do the kind of work** my dad **did**. (struck: ~~Everybody in my family, all of the men, worked with their hands, all of my relative and their friends, and they all worked at the mill. Nobody in my family had ever gone to college and nobody said that they thought I should go.~~)<sup>204</sup>

The struck text demonstrates that Carver, at least in retrospect, considered his engagement with the Palmer Institute to be more of a market transaction than an education. It is a performance of work, while “work[ing] with [...] hands” is real work. This is not to say the performative work does not have value—“Never know when such a diploma will come in handy!”—but it is to say that the “hard work” the Palmer Institute encouraged differed from the hard work of the saw mill, at least in Carver’s memory.

The Palmer Institute, with its payment plans, accrediting function, and promise of capital (both financial and cultural) is analogous to the university, the site of further training in creative

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<sup>204</sup> Raymond Carver, typescript of *Paris Review* interview, file 92, the Raymond Carver Papers, Ohio State University Library, Columbus, OH. All emphases original.

writing. In contrasting the Palmer Institute with the university, we see two forms of creative education and professionalization and two corresponding and opposing theories of literary professionalism. The first suggests that when a writer enters the public sphere, the market will validate and reward his or her efforts. The second professionalizing process is a fundamentally private one, involving a retreat from the public sphere, often to a private university, where the forces of the market can be held at bay. We have here a set of binary oppositions: public versus private, market success versus market failure, conventional or generic versus the unconventional.

The NEA grant thus stands as a crucial third term, one that troubles these binaries. It is a grant from that most public of institutions, the federal government, but it is money that allows the writer to remain hard at work in the privacy of his own home. (Recall Ellison's ideal writer's residence in Chapter One.) It is designed to reward writers "early in their careers, when they most needed financial support and acknowledgement to keep writing," with the expectation that the writers' work will soon be "reaching audiences"—a reading public—as a result.<sup>205</sup> The stipend is both a substitute for book royalties and a harbinger of financial rewards to come. As such, the NEA fellowship forced Carver, and now forces us, to reconsider what constitutes work and what makes an amateur writer into a professional one. The answers Carver came up with in his poetry and prose shed light on how he conceived of his class-based identity as well as his artistic one.

#### ALLEGORIES OF ARTISTIC LABOR: CARVER'S *KÜNSTLERROMANE*

It surprises most contemporary readers to learn that Carver considered himself to be just as much a poet as he was a writer of fiction. Both his first and last collections were books of

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<sup>205</sup> Amy Stoll, "The NEA Literature Fellowships Turn Forty: An Introduction," 3.

poetry (*Near Klamath* and *A New Path to the Waterfall*), as were three of his last four publications (*Where Water Comes Together With Other Water* and *Ultramarine*, in addition to *Waterfall*). All told, he published seven books of poetry, compared to only five books of previously unpublished fiction. Notably, the first few of these were written while he was a student, and the last of them while he was supported by the Straus Living grant, a time when he was living with Tess Gallagher, herself a poet and thus a presence that might have had some influence on his creative output. It seems that when Carver was supported by patrons other than the state, times when he was free of both market forces as well as the expectations of reaching a national audience, Carver turned to poetry. As Sklenicka puts it, “The urge that drove him to write poems was a mixture of all of these, but it was certainly *not* a calculated effort to increase his readership or sales.”<sup>206</sup> And so in his last few years, while living in Port Angeles, Carver combined catching fish and writing poems, and he drew analogies between them: “There’s a bite on here every morning, around five to five-thirty [...] Keepers ... I’m not into catch and release. I just start clubbing them into submission.”<sup>207</sup>

For the most part, Carver’s poems resemble his short stories: brief sketches about domestic disputes and familiar figures from his life experiences. There are poems about fishing, poems about drinking, poems about his first wife and his second wife, all told in compact and simple language. Gallagher found Carver’s poems to be even more direct, and thus more effective, than his stories: “Perhaps in the blunt-nosed zigzag of poems he could attain elevation without the sleek evasions of elegance, irony or even the easy exit of transcendence.”<sup>208</sup> This

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<sup>206</sup> Sklenicka, *Raymond Carver*, 420.

<sup>207</sup> Qtd. in Sklenicka, *Raymond Carver*, 415-416.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, 413.

same bluntness characterizes a poem from Carver's mid-career called "For Semra, With Martial Vigor," which was first published in the collection *Fires: Essays, Poems, Stories* from 1983. Like many of Carver's poems, "For Semra" has suffered from critical neglect, but the poem is significant for the way it addresses quite directly the problem of being a professional writer in the United States, a country that had not, historically, offered artists consistent and adequate financial support.

"For Semra" is a conversation poem, one that describes an encounter in a bar between the speaker and a woman named Semra. It is written in a form of free verse that imitates the rhythms of everyday speech. The first stanza begins with a matter-of-fact discussion about the economics of writing. The discussion soon becomes eroticized when the speaker begins to write a poem for Semra, claiming, "All poems are love poems" (Carver, *Fires*, 48); the stanza ends with the speaker "putting [his] hand on her thigh" (Carver, *Fires*, 48). In the second stanza, the conversation slides from the cities they love to the writers they like to the ethics of military engagement. The speaker gets drunk, and the joy of the encounter predictably dissolves, leaving Semra, like many a woman who passed through Carver's life, frustrated and dissatisfied: "I don't know why the hell/ I let you pick me up" (Carver, *Fires*, 49).

The most significant portion of the poem, for my purposes, comes before the drama of drunkenness, when the speaker is still lucid and sober. Semra asks the speaker how much writers make, to which he responds, "Not much I said / they have to do other things as well" (Carver, *Fires*, 48), and then he proceeds to enumerate the various jobs a writer might hold: "Like working in mills I said / sweeping floors teaching school / picking fruit / whatnot / all kinds of things" (Carver, *Fires*, 48). Semra is incredulous: "In my country she said / someone who has been to college / would never sweep floors" (Carver, *Fires*, 48). The speaker reassures her:

“Well that’s just when they’re starting out I said / all writers make lots of money” (Carver, *Fires*, 48). In this last line, we hear echoes of the Palmer Institute’s promises, that authorship is a “lucrative” field and that writers will be paid “handsomely.” These financial rewards also represent the writer’s ascent from the laboring class—the class of people who earn a living “sweeping floors”—to the professional class. But Semra’s remarks—“someone who has been to college / would never sweep floors”—underscore the strange and more complicated classed existence of the working-class writer, a person with education but not economic security, cultural capital but not financial capital. In some sense, the speaker already has the credentials to belong to a higher class of people, but he lacks the financial resources to stay there. The brief aside, “In my country,” seems to serve as Carver’s indictment of the U.S. government’s support of its artists. Other countries might be “peaceable kingdom[s],” but America was a land of constant and violent struggle. State patronage, the poem implies, is simply the writer’s just rewards.

“For Semra” is one of Carver’s briefest and bluntest portraits of the writer’s life. In *Fires*, “For Semra” sits alongside other meditations on the difficulty of being a writer, the most remarkable of which is the titular essay, in which Carver tracks the various obstacles to creative productivity, including and most especially the presence of his children. Retelling a story about yet another Saturday spent in the laundromat instead of writing, Carver recalls the desperation he felt as a parent: “I understood writers to be people who didn’t spend their Saturdays at the laundromat and every waking hour subject to the needs and caprices of their children. Sure, sure, there’ve been plenty of writers who have had far more serious impediments to their work [...] But knowing this was no consolation. At that moment [...] I could see nothing ahead but years more of this kind of responsibility and perplexity” (Carver, *Fires*, 24). The obstacles to artistic success clearly concerned Carver, so much so that he worked through them in all genres: poetry,

essays, and, most significantly, his fiction. While it's true this theme pervades much of Carver's fiction, it appears most prominently in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, the collection Carver completed with the help of the NEA grant. I suggest that the portraits of the artist that Carver provides in this collection demonstrate his changing understanding about literary professionalism and creative work. This fiction, then, is both the product of state patronage and an illustration of its effects.

Two stories in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* demonstrate the shift in Carver's professional identity and the concomitant change in his relationship to his creative work. "What Do You Do In San Francisco?" is one of Carver's earliest compositions. Written between 1961 and 1963, when Carver was studying with Richard C. Day at Humboldt State and working in a sawmill during the summer, the story describes the lives of a pair of artists as seen by Henry Robinson, who describes himself as a "postman" and "federal civil servant" (Carver, *WYPBQP*, 111). Filtered through Robinson's perspective, the artistic life seems to be one of indolence and insensitivity, a life that might only be salvaged by some form of salaried employment. By the time Carver composed "Put Yourself In My Shoes," however, his understanding of artistic work had changed significantly. The latter story, written while Carver was receiving support from the NEA, depicts the writer as a working professional and suggests that creative work is not all that dissimilar from office work. Though "Put Yourself in My Shoes" in some ways validates creative writing as a career choice, the story also shows that professionalizing artistic production comes with its own set of problems.

"What Do You Do In San Francisco?" begins with Robinson's paean to hard work: "I believe, too, in the value of work—the harder the better," he declares, "A man who isn't working has got too much time on his hands, too much time to dwell on himself and his problems"



(Carver, *WYBPQP*, 111). The man with “too much time on his hand” is one of the “Beatniks” (Carver, *WYBPQP*, 111) who recently moved to a house along Robinson’s postal route. “She was a painter. The young man, I don’t know what he did—probably something along the same line. Neither of them worked” (Carver, *WYBPQP*, 112). When Robinson offers the young man a lead on a job at a sawmill, the man refuses. His wife explains, “He’s not looking for a job” (Carver, *WYBPQP*, 114). The woman’s use of the word “job” suggests a distinction between wage labor and craft. The terms of “work” are thus firmly established at the story’s outset: to work means to have a “job” away from the home and to earn a wage based on the time spent at said job. The term does not apply to the effort that artistic creation entails.

This binary between wage labor and creative labor seems too simple, and yet the story refuses to complicate it and instead, as it proceeds, only reinforces it. As he carefully observes the couple, Robinson perceives only unfinished or failed efforts: the U-Haul remains unpacked, the name on the mailbox remains unchanged, domestic chores are left untended, and the children run around the yard unsupervised. “Their mama and daddy were nowhere to be seen,” Robinson observes (Carver, *WYBPQP*, 115). The painter eventually leaves her husband for another man, and the young man sits each day on the stoop of the house, accomplishing nothing, waiting for a letter that might explain his newfound solitude. “Why don’t you go to work and forget her?” Robinson recommends, “What have you got against work?” (Carver, *WYBPQP*, 120). The man eventually disappears, leaving no forwarding address, and we are left with Robinson’s reflections on the salvific effect of his own profession: “It’s all work, one way or the other, and I’m always glad to have it” (Carver, *WYBPQP*, 121). “What Do You Do In San Francisco?” paints a dire picture of the artist’s life, reflecting perhaps Carver’s own struggles to balance his studies and his summer employment with the composition of his short fiction. Of course, Carver would not be

one to roundly condemn the writing life as Robinson does, but even when we account for the story's dramatic irony, we still see the artistic world as one totally divorced from the world of wage-earning work. The struggle for the writer, then, is to find financial support and still have enough "time on his hands" to produce fiction.

By 1970, thanks to his severance package and his federal stipend, Carver had found that perfect and elusive marriage of unlimited time and financial solvency. The same is true of Myers, the protagonist of "Put Yourself in My Shoes" and the clearest alter ego that we find in Carver's fiction. Speaking about the story, Carver admitted, "every writer goes ahead and writes at least one story about a writer, and that's *my* story about a writer."<sup>209</sup> Indeed, the resemblances between author and character are eerily similar: Myers was formerly employed by a textbook company, but he has recently "quit to write a novel" (Carver, *WYPBQP*, 132) while his wife continues at her office job. At the story's opening, Myers is hard at work, but not working as the reader might expect a writer to work. Myers is, rather, hard at work vacuuming the "cat hairs between the cushions" (Carver, *WYPBQP*, 132). He has written nothing in days; he is "between stories, and he felt despicable" (Carver, *WYPBQP*, 134). Unlimited time to write does not, apparently, result in limitless creativity.

Though the story opens with a scene of domestic labor, it quickly switches to an exploration of the nature of artistic labor. Carl, Myers's former employer who has "always talked of going to Paris to write a novel" (Carver, *WYPBQP*, 132), tries to cajole Myers into joining the company Christmas party. "Get him [Myers] down here for a drink," he orders Myers's wife, "Get him out of his ivory tower and back into the real world for a while" (Carver, *WYPBQP*,

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<sup>209</sup> Kay Bonetti, "Ray Carver: Keeping It Short," in *Conversations with Raymond Carver*, ed. Marshall Bruce Gentry and William L. Stull (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), 61.

132). It is clear that Myers's apartment is no ivory tower—after all, he is first seen cleaning cushions that are covered in cat hair—but the comment introduces a vision of art and the art world as something elite, even foreign, and as something apart from the everyday. Myers, for his part, would like to take a more workmanlike approach to writing, writing some every day and taking holidays off. Making art could be a job like any other.

The contrast between these two theories of art—one that sees art as an endeavor for elites, who have the leisure time and life experience for producing it, and one that sees art as a product of dedicated labor, not unlike a textbook, that can be manufactured by anyone—is deepened by an encounter between two couples; the encounter provides the central conflict for the story. Myers and his wife, Paula, pay an unexpected visit to the Morgans, a couple from whom they once rented an apartment. It soon becomes clear that these couples are divided by socio-economic class, and that this class division maps onto contrasting ideas about the creation and dissemination of art. The Morgans are a cosmopolitan academic couple—more at home in an ivory tower than Myers would be—and they have just returned from Germany, a place Paula would like to go “as soon as we can afford it. Maybe as soon as Myers sells something” (Carver, *WYPBQP*, 139). The Morgans seem bemused by Myers's change in profession, which Mr. Morgan describes as “taking off work to write” (Carver, *WYPBQP*, 139). But Paula, proud of Myers's work ethic, brags that her husband “writes something almost every day” (Carver, *WYPBQP*, 139), a boast that leads to the following exchange:

“Is that a fact?” Morgan said. “That's impressive. What did you write today, may I ask?”

“Nothing,” Myers said.

“It's the holidays,” Paula said. (Carver, *WYPBQP*, 139)

It seems that Myers's creative process obeys the same schedule that structures the office environment: daily toil interrupted by socially approved reprieves. Though his daily existence resembles, at face, the life of an unemployed person (or, if we recall the story's opening, that of a midcentury housewife), Myers's life is in fact closer to that of a white-collar worker. Like his wife, Myers seems to be a member of what Barbara and John Ehrenreich have dubbed the "professional-managerial class."<sup>210</sup>

Myers and Paula may be professionals, but they are a step below the Morgans on the socio-economic ladder. The irony of this class division, in the Morgans' eyes, is that though they are not creative themselves, they benefit from having the kind of experiences that should be part of a writer's creative process. "I should think a trip to Europe would be very beneficial to a writer" (Carver, *WYPBQP*, 139), says Edgar Morgan, who then generously offers to share stories from his travels so that Myers might experience such adventures vicariously. The Morgans regale their guest with stories about their time in Germany, suggesting that they are providing the professional writer with "raw material" (Carver, *WYPBQP*, 145) and "Grist for the mill" (Carver, *WYPBQP*, 140). These stories all tend towards melodrama: the first describes a sordid affair between a professor and his student; the second the life of an aristocratic Australian dame, later revealed to be a pickpocket, who drops dead in the Morgans' apartment in Germany. Myers has no tolerance for the clichéd language of these tales, nor does he agree with the Morgans' many injunctions to "Put yourself in the shoes of that eighteen-year-old coed" (Carver, *WYPBQP*, 141) or to "plumb the depths of that poor soul's heart and try to understand" (Carver, *WYPBQP*, 149). The Morgans, evidently, believe that the writer has an essentially empathic relation to his subject matter and that his job is to render his characters sympathetic to a reader through a portrayal of

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<sup>210</sup> Barbara and John Ehrenreich, "The Professional-Managerial Class," *Between Labor and Capital*, ed. Pat Walker (Boston: South End, 1979), 12.

psychological interiority. This theory of fiction is descended from nineteenth-century realism, in which the use of free indirect discourse facilitates empathic identification.<sup>211</sup> Morgan himself makes this connection when he remarks, “It would take a Tolstoy to tell it and tell it *right*” (Carver, *WYBPQP*, 142, emphasis original). Carver, of course, breaks with this tradition, eschewing psychological interiority entirely and filling his stories with dialogue and surface details instead. When Mrs. Morgan begins weeping into her cup at the sight of Christmas carolers, we know neither why she weeps nor what such weeping means for a reading of the story. We are just as disoriented as visitors to a foreign land.

“Put Yourself in My Shoes” is thus Carver’s *ars poetica* as well as his portrait of the artist, an artist who, by the story’s end, upon leaving the Morgans’ house, finds himself, “at the very end of a story” (Carver, *WYBPQP*, 152). It is also, as I noted earlier, Carver’s most self-reflexive work of short fiction. The story’s final line, quoted above, is a perfect example of this reflexivity, as it appears at the story’s end. Here, we see Carver edging towards the metafictional world of writers like John Barth, whose experimentalism he would later repudiate. If we view this story in the context of Carver’s support from the state, we might see such self-reflexive literature as a way of working out a newfound professional identity.

We might also see this self-reflexivity as a dismissal of the dictates of the market. As observed earlier, Carver first became acquainted with the literary marketplace through the Palmer Institute correspondence course, which, in a section of its materials called “Why People Read,” explains what kind of stories sold: “In a well written story the reader is planted into the shoes of the main character, shares his trials and tribulations, reads his thoughts, feels the thrill of

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<sup>211</sup> On this and the connection between empathic reading and social reform, see Amanda Claybaugh, *The Novel of Purpose: Literature and Social Reform in the Anglo-American World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

his exciting experiences, worries over his difficulties, and rejoices with him in his success. The reader, for the moment, is ‘taken out of himself’ and in the person of the story character, lives a life of adventure, romance and achievement he would like to live if only he had the chance—the wit—and the courage.”<sup>212</sup> Moreover, one of the Palmer Institute instructional pamphlets expressly discouraged writers from writing stories about writers. “For some reason editors have this story pattern high on their list of taboo stories; stories they won’t purchase and publish,” the unnamed Institute writer explains. “Such a story has two strikes against it right from the start. The only way such a story can be put over with the markets is to give it such startlingly unusual and different and original treatment that the aspirant-author situation does not become obtrusive. And I think it would take a very experienced, professional writer to accomplish it.”<sup>213</sup> If we understand the Morgans’ preferences for slightly sensational and yet realistic stories as the tastes of the book-buying public, then Myers’s (and Carver’s) refusal of these expectations represents a rejection of the literary marketplace. Such a rejection can only occur, I would contend, with the support of a patron, who is, in this case, the federal government. This, then, is what state-funded fiction looks like: stylized and self-reflexive.

But of course Carver, always wary of experimental literary form, never drifted too far in the metafictional direction. To the contrary, Carver remained aware of the skills and preferences of the average reader and sought to tell a compelling story in the clearest and most precise language possible. To do otherwise, according to Carver, would be to shirk the fiction writer’s responsibility to his audience. In essays and interviews, Carver put forward the point that fiction should never alienate the average reader. For instance, in “On Writing,” collected in *Fires*,

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<sup>212</sup> Qtd. in Sklenicka, *Raymond Carver*, 39.

<sup>213</sup> Palmer Institute, “Q&A,” file 205, the Raymond Carver Papers, Ohio State Library, Columbus, OH.

Carver discusses Barth and other postmodernists: “He [Barth] worries that experimentation may be on the way out, along with liberalism. I get a little nervous if I find myself within earshot of somber discussions about ‘formal innovation’ in fiction writing. Too often ‘experimentation’ is a license to be careless, silly or imitative in writing. Even worse, a license to try to brutalize or alienate the reader. Too often such writing gives us no news of the world” (Carver, *Fires*, 14). Similarly, in a *Paris Review* interview, Carver emphasized the entertainment value of art, a sentiment that would have scandalized certain gatekeepers of highbrow culture. “After all, art is a form of entertainment, yes?” he asked coyly, “Art is all the things art is supposed to be. But art is also a superior amusement. Am I wrong in thinking this?”<sup>214</sup> These were the governing principles of his prose style. They were also the foundation upon which he composed the final allegory of artistic production that I examine here, a short story called “Feathers.”

At first glance, “Feathers,” the opening story in Carver’s 1983 collection, *Cathedral*, seems to have very little to do with the politics of artistic production. The story describes the strange collision of two couples over supper. The narrator and his girlfriend, Fran, who spend their evenings “wish[ing] out loud for things we didn’t have,” pay a visit Bud and Olla, who live out in “the sticks.”<sup>215</sup> Upon their arrival, the narrator and Fran are greeted by a peacock, whose cry sounds like that of the baby who is shut away inside. The beautiful peacock and the “ugliest baby I’d ever seen” (Carver, *Cathedral*, 20) serve as equal and opposing forces; both figures interrupt the dinner party with their squalls, and both inspire awe and terror in the visitors. The two figures finally encounter each other just before the dessert course. The story ends with the

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<sup>214</sup> Mona Simpson and Lewis Buzbee, *Conversations with Raymond Carver*, 52.

<sup>215</sup> Raymond Carver, *Cathedral: Stories* (New York: Knopf, 1984), 5, 7. Hereafter cited in text by page number.

insinuation that Fran's desire to have a child began that night; this act of childbearing catalyzed the disintegration of Fran and the narrator's marriage.

Unlike the stories examined earlier, "Feathers" does not feature an artist figure, but the story is nonetheless invested in the nature of aesthetic experience. The baby and the peacock—embodiments of beauty and ugliness, respectively—impinge on the social world and inspire affective responses that domestic rituals cannot contain and for which they cannot account. There seems to be a fundamental incompatibility between the extreme aesthetic qualities of the fantastic peacock and the horrifically ugly child and the workaday life of the main characters. Carver lent some credence to this reading of the story in a 1986 interview, during which he expounded on the relationship between aesthetic pleasure and the lives of the lower-middle-class citizen. In the interview, John Alton asked Carver if part of the point of "Feathers," in which "the narrator and his wife seem poisoned by the beauty they witness," was to suggest that "the lower-middle class should be kept out of art museums."<sup>216</sup> Carver denied that he intended to communicate such a message, but when pressed by Alton—"Would it be safe to say that lower-middle class conditions—isolation, physical and emotional exhaustion, the drain on the internal life—somehow deplete the capacity for an appreciation of beauty, or alter the effect that beauty has on people?"—Carver acknowledged, "I think those people you're talking about don't have time to go to museums, and they—most of them at any rate—don't have time to read books, and they don't have time to go to lectures and concerts."<sup>217</sup> These were concerns that were shared by other writers of the minimalist school, most notably Bobbie Ann Mason, a writer whom Carver

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<sup>216</sup> John Alton, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Literature: An Interview With Raymond Carver," in *Conversations with Raymond Carver*, 165.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.



admired. Mason, in a 1991 interview, expressed similar ideas about the way the demands of working-class life preclude access to artistic experience: “I find it odd that I’m writing for an audience that is particularly well educated,” she says, “I’m sorry the general public can’t read what I write. I think they are capable of it, but they don’t have access to it. People don’t know they can go to a library and read. I think they feel a class inhibition. [...] A factory worker is not going to go to the opera. It’s just unthinkable.”<sup>218</sup> The relationship between minimalism, perceived as a broadly accessible form of prose fiction, and the NEA’s crisis of the 1980s is the subject of the chapter that follows.

#### WORKING-CLASS ENCOUNTERS: RAYMOND CARVER AND DAGOBERTO GILB

The paradox of *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, one of the books that earned Carver the title “chronicler of blue-collar despair,” is that it depicts the blue-collar life in order to facilitate its author’s escape from that life. It is not a nostalgic text, but it is a belated one, describing a life that was, for Carver, already the past. By the time *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* was published, Carver was firmly established as a white-collar worker—a creative writing instructor—and was terrified of backsliding. To some, the collection registers this fear, such that the working life it depicts takes on a different shine. According to Texas writer Max Crawford, for instance, Ray’s “absolute terror of having to go back to the working class really informs his stories in a way that few literary intellectuals understand. The best thing for him was when he got a white-collar job with a pen holder in his pocket. He loved that.”<sup>219</sup> Carver, then, exists at a double-remove from his fiction about lives that were like his past life: not only is there

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<sup>218</sup> Bonnie Lyons and Bill Oliver, “An Interview with Bobbie Ann Mason,” in *Bobbie Ann Mason: A Study of the Short Fiction*, ed. Albert Wilhelm (New York: Twayne, 1998), 177.

<sup>219</sup> Qtd. in Sklenicka, *Raymond Carver*, 237.

the usual distance between author and character, but there is an additional distance, as the white-collar Carver reflects on the experiences of his younger, blue-collar self.

Carver's encounter with another working-class writer throws into relief the tension between the lives of working-class Americans, illuminated by Carver, and the class position Carver achieved thanks to the success of his fiction. The year after the publication of *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, Dagoberto Gilb, an as-yet-unpublished writer, was working on an addition to the University of Texas at El Paso, the institution at which Carver was teaching. Curious about Carver, Gilb picked up a copy of *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, but he found himself alienated from the characters depicted within it. As he later told Carver's biographer, "Those stories didn't seem to be about working people. Working people are energetic. They can be dangerous and crazy, but they are not sitting around. I could see where he came from the working class, but he *wasn't* it. His stories were about graduate students' lives, but he smartly made his characters vacuum cleaner salesmen or whatever."<sup>220</sup> Nonetheless, Gilb tried to forge a connection with Carver, sending the more established writer one of his short stories. "I thought, they want stories about working people," Gilb recalled, "I'm doing the shit, and I'll tell you what it's like."<sup>221</sup> According to Gilb, Carver liked the story and recommended the University of Iowa program but did so somewhat sheepishly. "All I could think of [...] was that *his* job was the job I dreamed about, being a professor," said Gilb. "And there he was, as if he were ashamed of it and telling me that he was like me."<sup>222</sup> Carver and Gilb had more in common, however, than Gilb lets

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<sup>220</sup> Qtd. in Sklenicka, *Raymond Carver*, 341.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid. Elsewhere, Gilb describes this encounter in similar terms: "And then I met Raymond Carver. Did he mentor me? No. He was a guy that was publishing, getting famous writing stories about the working class, which was what I was doing across the street. And so I thought, 'Oh,

on here. Like Carver, Gilb was born to working-class parents; worked several low-paying, labor intensive jobs (including stockboy, paper cutter, and, like Carver, janitor); transferred between different colleges before finally graduating from the University of California at Santa Barbara; and continued to perform manual labor, mostly as a high-rise construction worker, while pursuing a writing career. Thus, Gilb's class identity was just as nuanced as Carver's was, despite the pride Gilb expresses in the above passage.

There is one more similarity between Carver's career and Gilb's, and it is, for my purposes, the most significant one. Gilb, like Carver was the recipient of an NEA Literature Fellowship, awarded in 1992 based on Gilb's early short fiction efforts, some of which were collected in *Winners at the Pass Line* (1985). While on the NEA grant, Gilb completed the collection that would earn him critical acclaim, *The Magic of Blood* (1993), which won the PEN/Hemingway Award, the Texas Institute for Letters Award for Fiction, and which was nominated for the PEN/Faulkner Award. According to Gilb's personal website (run through Grove Press), the collection also "created a populist stir among those interested in the virtually-abandoned American working-class, and made Gilb a voice of labor and unionism, once even as a headliner alongside legendary folk singer Pete Seeger."<sup>223</sup> Like the work of Carver and other minimalists, Gilb's fiction about working-class people was perceived as populist, and as such it

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they are interested in the working class and here I am working. He's teaching over there and I am banging nails over there and I can tell you a story or two. I know a few stories." "Dagoberto Gilb," by Robert Birnbaum, *Identity Theory*, 28 May 2004  
<http://www.identitytheory.com/dagoberto-gilb/>.

<sup>223</sup> "Dagoberto Gilb," <http://www.dagobertogilb.com/>.

was embraced by the NEA.<sup>224</sup> It was Gilb's non-elite status, then, that moved him into the view of the cultural elite.

I compare Gilb and Carver in order to show that class status is constantly shifting for the working-class writer, especially those brought into a new class position precisely because of their working-class origins. Gilb also works out his new class status in his self-reflexive stories. His "story about a writer" appears midway through *The Magic of Blood*. The story, "Recipe," begins at a poetry reading at a university, where the narrator, feeling out of place (or so we infer), "take[s] a seat away from the lump of the audience."<sup>225</sup> When asked by an audience member if he is a writer, the narrator responds: "You will shrug, shake your head without conviction, and say you're an ironworker. He should be surprised that you're an ironworker and a writer" (Gilb, *The Magic of Blood*, 165). It turns out the interlocutor also has intellectual ambitions: "You should ask him if he's a writer. He will say that he has lots of ideas. He will say he does maintenance work at the college" (Gilb, *The Magic of Blood*, 165). Like Gilb, this character, Pablo, works in construction: "He should tell you that he has done some work in construction, that his father was a cement-finisher, and you should tell him that it seems to you that there's a lot of work, that he looks strong enough" (Gilb, *The Magic of Blood*, 165). As in Carver's "What Do You Do In San Francisco?", the nature of work in "Recipe" is established early in the story as something physical, wage-earning, or, in any case, something entirely separate from creative production. Like Carver's Henry Robinson, who embraces his job traveling by foot from house to house, both the narrator and Pablo seem to take pride in their physical strength and the work

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<sup>224</sup> This point is discussed more in the following chapter.

<sup>225</sup> Dagoberto Gilb, *The Magic of Blood* (New York: Grove Press, 1994), 165. Hereafter cited in text by page number. It is worth noting that the first edition of the book was published by the University of New Mexico Press. Gilb now teaches at Southwest Texas State University, further evidence that Gilb is as enmeshed with the university as Carver was.

they perform; they are men “strong enough” to do a lot of work and, apparently, still find time to attend poetry readings. (Later in the story, the narrator will point to the buildings he worked on “with typical ironworker’s pride” [Gilb, *The Magic of Blood*, 167].) In this moment, both men are in the university but not of it; their manual labor separates them from the intellectual labor that the university is designed to cultivate, even though it is their labor upon which the university rests.

The story soon moves, as many in *The Magic of Blood* do, to questions about love, but even here questions about art, or rather about what makes an artist an artist, persist. Pablo and the narrator come upon two pretty women at the reading, one of whom, Monica, has artistic aspirations. Like Pablo, she has “lots of ideas” (Gilb, *The Magic of Blood*, 166). As the foursome moves onto a party, both Pablo and Monica confess their desires to be published, or to be famous, whichever comes first:

Soon Monica will be wearing Pablo’s jacket. Pablo will say to you that he wants to be a writer. He will say that he wants to be up there. He will mean his name. Monica will say she wishes she could get a poem published. Pablo will ask her if she knows any by heart. She will say yes and be embarrassed. He will tell her to go ahead, that we four will be the only ones to hear it. She will be coaxed into it. It will be a poem about lost love. It will be bad but Pablo will say it’s good and Josie will say she thinks Monica writes beautifully and she will look to you to say something untrue and you will say you wish you could write poetry but it’s hard when you’re an ironworker. They will laugh. You will too. (Gilb, *The Magic of Blood*, 168)

Here, a joke punctures the solemnity of the moment, but it is not clear from Gilb’s minimalist style whether the narrator’s joke, designed to mask his true thoughts about the poem, is a true statement or a false one. It is, undoubtedly, hard to write “when you’re an ironworker,” but the implied sarcastic tone calls the authenticity of the narrator’s statement, or rather the authenticity of his ambitions, into question. Is the narrator any more artistically inclined than the others? Is he

any more talented than Monica or any more purely motivated than Pablo? And do the answers to these questions change whether or not the narrator can call himself a writer? Should he continue to call himself an ironworker instead? These are the questions that are animating the story.

“Recipe” is also the most formally interesting of the stories in the collection, and its formal idiosyncrasies have significant payoffs for the concerns of this chapter. The entire story is told in the second person, a technique that places the reader in the position of the working-class writer, essentially putting the reader in his shoes. Whether or not Gilb aims to appeal to a working-class reader or to cultivate empathy (or maybe discomfort) within a well-educated one is up for debate. If we take into account the strange title of the story, “Recipe,” however, the use of the second person starts to look more like self-address. The pervasive use of the imperative—“should,” “must”—only supports this reading, and the sentences start to look more like reminders to oneself, perhaps instructions to the professional writer about how to write about the amateur writer he used to be. In this sense, the self-reflexive story registers the distance between Gilb and his alter ego; like Carver, Gilb has already moved on from this identity.

## CONCLUSION: ON SOCIAL IMMOBILITY

For both Carver and Gilb, working-class origins are just that: origins, biographical and artistic, the material out of which they build their fictions. They are not, however, an indicator of class status once they became literary professionals, unless we consider class to be an identity category rather than an economic relation. Though some scholars have argued vehemently and unequivocally that class is not an identity, or at least not an identity in the way that race or gender is, many others have noted the ways in which markers of one class persist even when a

person moves into another.<sup>226</sup> In the *PMLA* special issue on “rereading class,” Peter Hitchcock, called upon to represent the working-class on a panel even though he is longer a member of that group (at least, not in economic terms), calls class “elusive and unstable” and aims to dispel the “assumption that working-class communities only exist as that from which one must escape.”<sup>227</sup> Rita Felski, in the same issue, focuses on the “physic” and “semiotic” dimensions of class, specifically the lower-middle class, the one from which she hails.<sup>228</sup> Citing Raymond Williams and E. P. Thompson, she contends, “class distinctions are also shaped by consumptions practices and lifestyles patterns that do not bear any simple relation to the basic division between capital and labor.”<sup>229</sup> When she explores the relationship between “shame and social mobility,” Felski opens up a host of questions about how permanent or impermanent class identity may be and asks, “Is class origin, then, more analogous to sexuality as a marker of identity that can be

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<sup>226</sup> Walter Benn Michaels is perhaps the best known of those who aim to disentangle class from other identities. See, for example, his essay “The Beauty of a Social Problem,” in *The Brooklyn Rail*, in which he argues, “The inequality produced and maintained by the unemployed is thus different from other inequalities, like racism or sexism.” Walter Benn Michaels, “The Beauty of a Social Problem,” *The Brooklyn Rail*, <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2011/10/art/the-beauty-of-a-social-problem>. For a sustained version of this argument, see *The Trouble With Diversity*, in which he puts the argument in the simplest terms: “we love race—we love identity—because we don’t love class [...] what poor people want is not to contribute to diversity but to minimize their contribution to it—they want to stop being poor. Celebrating the diversity of American life has become the American left’s way of accepting their poverty, of accepting inequality.” Walter Benn Michaels, *The Trouble With Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006), 6-7.

<sup>227</sup> Peter Hitchcock, “They Must Be Represented? Problems in Theories of Working-Class Representation,” *Publications of the Modern Language Association: Rereading Class* 115, no. 1 (January 2000): 20, 21.

<sup>228</sup> Rita Felski, “Nothing to Declare: Identity, Shame, and the Lower Middle Class,” *Publications of the Modern Language Association: Rereading Class* 115, no. 1 (2000): 34.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

disguised and hidden from other?”<sup>230</sup> Felski concludes that the analogy does not quite hold, that hiding one’s class of origin and impersonating a new class identity works if class is simply an indicator of wealth, but if class is also a psychic condition, one that comes with a set of affective experiences—shame, for Felski, being the most significant of these—then the class identity one holds at birth begins to seem more stable and permanent.

Carver—like Hitchcock and Felski—entered the academic world and so exited the working-class world from which he came, but he never quite shook his original class identity. Even in the academy, his sense of his class status determined his social world. During his time at Stanford on a prestigious Stegner fellowship, Carver fell in with Chuck Kinder and his friends. “Crossing the creek to Kinder’s,” writes Sklenicka, “was like entering another world [...] With few exceptions, the men who populated this bad-old-days were provincials—small-town westerners or Southerners and country boys who brought their working-class backgrounds and literary aspirations to Silicon Valley.”<sup>231</sup> Gurney Norman, remembering this time, identifies class as the binding factor: “It was all of our working-class backgrounds that connected us underneath. When I would have a few beers, I would start telling anecdotes about my hillbilly family. Ray need not himself have had much awareness of this particular line of thinking—it’s just that he *embodied* it. It’s central to Ray’s total identity.”<sup>232</sup> Carver’s closest friends and colleagues tended to be those who came from similar circumstances: Richard Ford, Tobias Wolff, and Tess Gallagher, to name a few. His characters may have been graduate students disguised as carpenters, as Gilb claimed, but they were also carpenters disguised as graduate students, like the

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<sup>230</sup> Felski, “Nothing to Declare,” 38.

<sup>231</sup> Sklenicka, *Raymond Carver*, 236.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.



characters of “Night School” and like those of Gilb’s “Recipe,” people who spoke publicly about their artistic and intellectual ambitions but who were without the skills or the resources to realize them; this was a situation that Carver had experienced and one to which he feared returning. While the institutions of patronage—the university and the NEA—may have professionalized Carver, they did not erase his past identities, those that inscribed him within the working class. These former forms of work remained with him, shaping his social world and, of course, the creative work that he produced.

## Chapter Four

### Mason, Minimalism, and National Memory

Writing on the fortieth anniversary of the NEA Literary Fellowship Program, the American writer Bobbie Ann Mason sounded a strange note of self-defense. Discussing her first and best-selling novel, *In Country* (1987), which she wrote with the aid of a grant from the U.S. government, Mason explains:

I wanted to do something that would be rich and lasting, but I never expected it to have such popular appeal and tangible social effect. Yet this novel [*In Country*] was a surprising commercial success, and it has affected the lives of many people.

The NEA grant helped me write the novel, which I did for my own artistic reasons. I report these unexpected benefits that *In Country* brought to the community—from the classroom to the veterans' group to the economy to the morale of my own hometown—because I think they are significant in reminding people that what may look like self-indulgence in its beginnings can turn out to have long-reaching, positive effects on the culture.<sup>233</sup>

Mason is referring to the afterlife of *In Country* in American culture. The novel, which uses a teenage girl's coming-of-age story to explore the aftermath of the Vietnam War, proved quite popular with the American public: it was, as Mason says, a "commercial success"; it was adapted for a movie that featured A-list actors; and it encouraged Mason, with the help of the NEA, to launch writing programs for returning veterans. All positive developments, to be sure, but Mason's choice to highlight them in this passage so that they supplement, or even supplant, her "own artistic reasons" raises several questions for the literary historian: When did "social effect[s]" become the standard by which fiction should be evaluated? Whence this fear of artistic self-indulgence? Who belongs to the "community" that art should aid?

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<sup>233</sup> Qtd. in "NEA Literary Fellowships: Forty Years of Supporting American Writers," *NEA Literature Fellowships: Forty Years of Supporting American Writers* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts Office of Communications, 2006), 30.

These implicit questions, and Mason's explicit remarks in the above passage, nicely sum up the changing expectations for writers publishing in the era of state patronage, a moment when "social effect" and "popular appeal" became inextricably linked to an artwork's success. The NEA generated a new sense of public investment in the aesthetic life of the nation such that all forms of art, including the novel, became, in an important sense, public. As I will argue in this chapter, the pressures of public life proved true for even the most domestic, most inward-looking, most private forms of fiction such as minimalism, the literary movement of which Mason was a part.

Minimalism is a movement that went by many a name—"dirty realism," "K-mart realism," "hick chic"—but contemporary critics seem to have settled on the term "minimalism."<sup>234</sup> This label designates the work of a group of 1980s short fiction writers—including Raymond Carver, Richard Ford, and Mason herself—who wrote about the lives of working-class Americans in a pared-down prose style. However, the name may be the only aspect of the movement upon which critics agree. Indeed, literary minimalism seems to have confounded critics both past and present.<sup>235</sup> Since the very moment of its emergence in the early 1980s, cultural observers have tried to trace the source of this new mode of writing and explain why it appealed to the American public. John Barth, writing for the *New York Times Book Review* in 1986, suggested that the new literary movement was connected to the "national decline in reading and writing skills" and claimed, "Dick-and-Jane prose tends to be emotionally

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<sup>234</sup> John Barth, "A Few Words About Minimalism" *New York Times Book Review*, 28 December 1986, 1.

<sup>235</sup> Michael Trussler also remarks upon the critical confusion surrounding the meaning and significance of the term "minimalism" and aims to formulate a more precise definition through a study of Raymond Carver's prose style. See Trussler, "The Narrowed Voice: Minimalism and Raymond Carver," *Studies in Short Fiction* 31 (1994): 23-37; see especially 23-25.

and intellectually poorer than Henry James prose.”<sup>236</sup> Several years after minimalism’s heyday, John Aldridge published a book-length screed against the new “assembly-line” fiction and the colleges and creative writing programs that produced it.<sup>237</sup> More recently, Mark McGurl offered a positive take on the connection between minimalism and the rise of the creative writing program, suggesting that shifting demographics in higher education made literacy and literature available to new classes of citizens. Meanwhile, Andrew Hoberek has suggested that American foreign policy, specifically modernization theory, encouraged a kind of formal resistance in minimalist writers, whose fictions subverted the systemization that modernization theory demands.<sup>238</sup> All persuasive explanations, but, as I will show here, they are incomplete without a consideration of the role federal agencies played in funding this form of fiction.

How and why did a reformed version of realism become so visible, and so controversial, during the 1980s? The answer, I will suggest, lies in the timely convergence of minimalist writers’ formal and thematic concerns and the goals of the NEA Literature Program. I propose a symbiotic relationship between the NEA Literature Program and the artists it supported in order to understand how and why certain aesthetic forms became evidence of a work’s social value. In the early 1980s, the NEA needed to present itself as a democratic, even a populist, organization, but one that was nevertheless still on the cutting edge of artistic trends. At the same time, a group of American writers, for “[their] own artistic reasons,” were experimenting with writing in

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<sup>236</sup> Barth, “A Few Words About Minimalism,” 1.

<sup>237</sup> See Aldridge, *Talents and Technicians: Literary Chic and the New Assembly-Line Fiction*. Aldridge blames the creative writing program for eradicating the “sense of otherness Henry James spoke of as the primary psychic orientation of the natural writer” (17) and stifling authorial originality. For a convincing refutation of Aldridge, see McGurl, 69, 273-4.

<sup>238</sup> Andrew Hoberek, “Foreign Objects, or, DeLillo Minimalist” *Studies in American Fiction* 37, no. 1 (2010): 101-125.

terse, even recalcitrant prose, the kind of language that seemed appropriate for post-traumatic, post-Vietnam America. The NEA was on the lookout for forms of fiction that would have “popular appeal” and “long-reaching, positive effects on culture” while still having aesthetic merit, and minimalism fit this set of seemingly contradictory criteria. At once simple and stylized, highly crafted and colloquial, minimalism marries unsophisticated content with artful literary technique in a way that appealed to readers, select reviewers, and bureaucrats alike. Minimalism became the NEA’s favored mode and its method of self-justification during a moment of crisis.

It would be too much, I think, to say that state funding *caused* or *inspired* this literary movement (to say this would be to misunderstand the relationship between aesthetic production and the institutions that support it), but we can say that the predominance of minimalism at this historical moment was overdetermined. The upshot of this strange alliance between minimalist writers and the state was the development of a fantasy of aesthetic populism, a vision that dictated both domestic arts policy and the aims of individual authors during the 1980s and afterward. The literary history of minimalism shows how realist style came to be understood as a populist aesthetic during a time when populist discourse permeated political discussion; this is an association that helps explain the resurgence of realism that we see at the end of the twentieth century.<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> Populism has a long history in America, some of which I will touch on later in this chapter. For the purposes of my argument, though, I refer to a version of postwar populism that generated suspicion of “elites” and suggested that “the people” should direct government policy. Richard Hofstadter, who offers a comprehensive account of Populism and Progressivism, describes the populist movement as one which “insist[ed] that the federal government had some responsibility for the common weal[.]” Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 62.

Thus, the argument I present not only revises the consensus understanding of minimalist fiction as a retreat into the domestic sphere but also helps explain the return to realism in the post-postmodern age.<sup>240</sup> Viewing minimalism through the lens of institutional support shows that minimalist writers did not quite retreat from history and focus solely on the “life-story,” as McGurl has claimed, but in fact produced subtle and substantive engagements with American history and public life, though these engagements were often less critical than Hoberek has suggested.<sup>241</sup> Minimalism is also part of a broader phenomenon, the return to realism at the end of the twentieth century. The story of this reinvigorated realism, like the story of the NEA, begins with the tension between high and low, between elitism and populism, a tension that has structured much of the conversation about art and culture in postwar America.

#### “POPULISM” AND “ELITISM”: THE NEA AND POLITICS OF STATE PATRONAGE

Clement Greenberg first identified realist or representational art with populism, in the most problematic sense, in his 1939 *Partisan Review* essay “Avant-garde and Kitsch.” With the

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<sup>240</sup> In her essay “Post-Postmodern Realism?,” Madhu Dubey notes American writers’ “renewed engagement with the social world” and productively poses the question “what would need to have changed in order for it [the social novel] to become valid again by 1990[?]” My aim in this essay is to pose some possible answers to Dubey’s question through an analysis of the NEA Literature Program’s shifting agenda as well as more general changes in the cultural atmosphere. See Madhu Dubey, “Post-Postmodern Realism?” *Twentieth Century: Postmodernism, Then* 57, no. 3-4 (2011): 364-371.

<sup>241</sup> McGurl examines minimalism in the context of the shifting demographics in the world of higher education and shows how writing by “lower-middle class modernis[ts],” such as Raymond Carver and Joyce Carol Oates, “cashes out, in the literary marketplace, as a dialectic of ‘minimalist’ and ‘maximalist’ narrative forms” (*The Program Era*, 286). Hoberek, for his part, aims to show how minimalist writers resisted modernization theory by refusing to succumb to the systemization of objects that such a theory dictated.

“falling away of aristocratic patronage,” Greenberg contends, artists found themselves subject to the forces of the market. The only way to avoid becoming complicit with capitalism was to turn inward and abandon society—as well as the representation of society—altogether. “It has been in search of the absolute that the avant-garde has arrived at ‘abstract’ or ‘non-objective’ art,” writes Greenberg. “Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself.” But the audience for such avant-garde art—the wealthy elites—seemed to be shrinking, and kitsch, “popular, commercial art and literature,” designed for profit, was becoming dominant.<sup>242</sup> The association of representational art with kitsch would endure for much of the postwar period.

If Greenberg identified the avant-garde’s inward turn with the decrease in aristocratic patronage and the dominance of market forces, one might think that the arrival of state patronage on the American scene would benefit the avant-garde artist, who could now disentangle herself entirely from the marketplace. But it was not immediately clear what kind of art the state should be funding: should it support the most innovative art in order to “keep culture *moving*” as Greenberg put it?<sup>243</sup> Or should it repay taxpayers dollars by funding art that would entertain the common consumer? This tension between populism and elitism has plagued the NEA since the moment of its inception in 1965. Recall Johnson’s words upon the signing of the law: “The arts and humanities belong to the people, for it is, after all, the people who created them.” The

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<sup>242</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Avant-garde and Kitsch,” *The New York Intellectuals Readers*, ed. Neil Jumonville (New York: Routledge, 2007), 146, 148. Dwight Macdonald, who commissioned Greenberg’s essay for the *Partisan Review*, would recapitulate this binary in “A Theory of ‘Popular Culture,’” *politics* (February 1944): 20-23.

<sup>243</sup> Greenberg, 22, emphasis original.

tension between expert opinion and popular taste would inform NEA policy as well as instigate some of the controversies that plagued the agency in later years.<sup>244</sup>

During the first decade of the agency's existence, however, it was thought that the expertise of art world elites could be used to improve the average citizen's aesthetic sensibilities. For the NEA Literature Program, achieving this objective meant, first, improving arts education through various initiatives and, second, supporting the kind of avant-garde fiction that did not often find a wide audience. The first director of the Literature Program, the poet Carolyn Kizer, stressed the importance of educating the public so that consumers could appreciate formally difficult art. In her projection for 1970, Kizer argued, "The Federal Government could support every writer, every artist, every publication in the country worthy of assistance, and we still have not come to grips with the basic problem: the American as arts consumer. [...] The basic answer lies, I believe, in an observation I have made many times during my three years with the Endowment: In Art, all roads lead to education."<sup>245</sup> To address this problem, Kizer organized education programs, including one that placed poets in the public schools.<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> On controversies in the visual arts that pitted popular taste versus elite opinions, see Brenson, *Visionaries and Outcasts*, 92-97.

<sup>245</sup> Carolyn Kizer, "Literary Programs: Projection for 1970," Subject Files of Chairman Roger Stevens, Box 12, RNEA, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

<sup>246</sup> A 1974 report to deputy chairman Mary Ann Tighe described the success of the program: "On the whole the spirit of most PITS [Poets In The Schools] workshops is one of benevolence [...] Most poets encourage students and participating teachers to trust and have faith in the intuitive powers of the imagination, and try to drive home the idea that good writing is born out of the individual taking risks with his or her own language as a reflection of his or her own world. [...] And despite the difficulty of providing material evidence of long-range follow-through, a national trend toward placing more and more emphasis on the new role of poetry and general creative writing in language arts curriculums in public school districts all over the country is apparent. [...] By now it is taken for granted that the PITS Program is an overwhelming success across the nation." "Poets in the Schools Program," Box 12, RNEA, National Archives II, College Park, MD.



In its early years, the NEA prioritized funding inscrutable, difficult, or political dissident writers, either through various initiatives like the *American Anthology* or through direct grants. Until 1974, the year the NEA Literature Fellowships changed to an open submission system, a grant applicant had to be nominated by an “established writer,” someone who served as a member of an oversight committee.<sup>247</sup> (This selection structure also might explain why formally innovative fiction had a stronger foothold in the NEA’s early years.) For instance, the inaugural group of grant recipients included William Gaddis (who won a second grant in 1974) and Olsen, two dense and difficult novelists. Over the course of the next dozen or so years, the NEA awarded grants to avant-gardist, countercultural, and experimental writers such as John Ashbery (1969), Richard Brautigan (1969), Charles Bukowski (1973), Peter Orlovsky (1979), Grace Paley (1967), Ishmael Reed (1975) and Aram Saroyan (1979).<sup>248</sup> Support for such challenging writers was not without a few public-relations pitfalls—the inclusion of Saroyan’s poem “light” in the aforementioned anthology drew some scrutiny—but overall, the agency flourished during the 1970s.<sup>249</sup> In fact, this decade saw the largest period of growth for the NEA, thanks largely to the efforts of Chairwoman Nancy Hanks, an astute politician who formed a crucial alliance with President Nixon, who was not initially friendly to the arts.<sup>250</sup> During her

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<sup>247</sup> Stoll, “The NEA Literature Fellowships Turn Forty,” 6.

<sup>248</sup> “Creative Writing Fellows” *NEA Literature Fellowships: Forty Years of Supporting American Writers*.

<sup>249</sup> According to NEA historian Amy Stoll, Michael Straight, then deputy chairman of the NEA, visited 46 different members of Congress in an effort to explain the selection of this poem, which indirectly received \$750 taxpayer dollars. Stoll, “The NEA Literature Fellowships Turn Forty,” 5.

<sup>250</sup> As Joseph Zeigler puts it, “She had an unerring political instinct, and a charm that could be put to fabulous use in the halls of Congress” (25). On Hanks and Nixon, see Joseph Wesley

tenure, the NEA's budget increased by 161%. (For comparison's sake, under Livingston Biddle, the chairman who succeeded Hanks, the budget increased 4%.<sup>251</sup>) Hanks's savvy handling of Congressional oversight allowed the NEA Literature Program to continue to fund the kind of innovative and interesting work that its experts selected.

With the election of President Ronald Reagan in 1981, however, the perceived divide between art world elites, who determined what projects received state funding, and the average American citizen, who was the consumer for this state-funded art, threatened the agency's very existence. Running against Jimmy Carter in 1980, Reagan promised to "end as soon as possible the politicization of the National Council on the Arts so conspicuous during the Carter-Mondale administration," and though he claimed to "hope that we could see a steady increase in funding," he reversed this promise in the weeks following his election.<sup>252</sup> In February, David Stockman, the director of the Office of Management and Budget, proposed a 50 percent cut to the NEA's budget for fiscal year 1982 and suggested that funds for 1981 be cut in half during the middle of the fiscal year.<sup>253</sup> Though the 1982 budget was reduced by only ten percent, thanks to the recommendation of a Reagan-appointed task force headed by Charlton Heston, it was clear that the period of growth the NEA enjoyed during the 1970s was over.

Support for federal subsidies for artists—or at least subsidies for more innovative artists—also seemed to be waning in the culture at large. Even Heston, in large part responsible for the NEA's survival under Reagan, warned: "To say that the NEA should be preoccupied with

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Zeigler, *Arts in Crisis: The National Endowment for the Arts Versus America* (New York: A Capella Books, 1994), 26-27.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>252</sup> Qtd. in Joseph Wesley Zeigler, *Arts in Crisis*, 45-6.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., 46-7.

subsidizing the leading edge of the arts is, I think, a highly suspect position. The leading edge of creativity in any field is always thin, sharp, and liable to get nicked.”<sup>254</sup> It is perhaps not surprising that in a moment of renewed faith in the free market, more cultural commentators suggested that the market, not the government, should dictate the kind of art that should be produced. Those who supported popular taste over critical judgment suggested that their position was more democratic than that of the NEA, which relied on the verdict of the few over the decisions of the many. Ben Wattenberg’s 1984 op-ed in the *Washington Post* is a representative example of this line of thinking. In “Participatory Democracy in the Book Business,” Wattenberg argued that the increase in book sales was a good thing, no matter the quality of the books being produced, and that the government should “Let the people decide” what kind of books should be published.<sup>255</sup> Mary MacArthur, then associate director of the Literature Program, objected to what she considered the false binary of this argument. In an internal memo to Hodsoll, she argued, “it’s not a struggle between ‘populism and elitism.’ Why must the choice be between books that will sell to the masses and books that will sell to the few. [...] Someone once said, alas I’ve forgotten who, that arguments over the ‘ivory tower’ versus ‘the arena’ are a waste of time. They tend to pit art against people — and to assume that the world of ideas is somehow separate from reality.”<sup>256</sup> Despite MacArthur’s reasoned protestations, the Literature Program felt pressure to subsidize fiction that would be popular with a mass audience while still

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<sup>254</sup> Qtd. in Zeigler, *Arts in Crisis*, 61.

<sup>255</sup> Ben Wattenberg, “Participatory Democracy in the Book Business,” *Washington Post* 11 August 1984, Subject Files of Chairman Frank Hodsoll, Box 12, RNEA, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

<sup>256</sup> Mary MacArthur, memo to Frank Hodsoll, Subject Files of Chairman Frank Hodsoll, Box 12, RNEA, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

upholding its promise to judge on artistic merit alone. What was needed was a new form of realism, one that was recognizable to the average reader but that would still “keep culture *moving*.”

## THE MINIMALIST MOVEMENT: A RETURN TO REALISM IN AMERICAN FICTION

Fortunately for the NEA, realism seemed to be staging a return right around the time that the agency came under siege for funding inaccessible art. “A new fiction seems to be emerging from America,” declared *Granta* editor Bill Buford in 1983 “and it is a fiction of a peculiar and haunting kind.”<sup>257</sup> Buford had detected the resurgence of the American short story, but this renaissance seemed to be taking a strange form. These were “unadorned, unfurnished, low-rent tragedies about people who watch day-time television, read cheap romances or listen to country and western music.”<sup>258</sup> *Granta* devoted two special issues to the “curious, dirty realism”<sup>259</sup> practiced by writers like Ann Beattie, Raymond Carver (discussed in the previous chapter), Richard Ford, and Mary Robison. As he notes in his introductory essay to the first of the two issues, Buford describes how these stories are “remarkably unlike what American fiction is usually understood to be.” He continues:

It is not heroic or grand: the epic ambitions of Norman Mailer or Saul Bellow seem, in contrast, inflated, strange, even false. It is not self-consciously experimental like so much of the writing—variously described as “postmodern,” “postcontemporary” or “deconstructionist”—that was published in the sixties and seventies. The work of John Barth, William Gaddis or Thomas Pynchon seem

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<sup>257</sup> Bill Buford, “Editorial,” “Dirty Realism: New Writing From America” special issue, *Granta*, August 15, 1983, 4.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid.

pretentious in comparison. [...] it makes the more traditional realistic novels of, say, Updike or Styron seem ornate, even baroque in comparison.<sup>260</sup>

The writers Buford was discussing were not producing big, ambitious, formally innovative novels, nor were they writing the “traditionally realistic” novels of the nineteenth century. Though they often tackled domestic issues, these writers nonetheless seemed to trade on absence, or on a lack of detail, in a way that differentiated their work from more familiar models of literary realism. In short, “dirty realism” fit uneasily within the categories available to Buford at this time.

Prior to 1980, literary “minimalism” referred, in a general sense, to an aesthetic of omission, reduction, or simplicity. Samuel Beckett and Ernest Hemingway, long admired by both writers and critics, modeled the minimalist aesthetic.<sup>261</sup> The writers who took up the mantle of minimalism in the late-twentieth century, however, proved to be decidedly less popular with reviewers. In a thorough critique of minimalist writers including Beattie, Carver, and Amy Hempel for *Harper's*, Madison Smartt Bell described this fictional mode as informed by “polite nihilism” and “dimestore determinism,” and faulted these writers for failing to “rise above the trivial.”<sup>262</sup> And yet this new fiction, seemingly so deserving of scorn, eluded easy definition.

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<sup>260</sup> Buford, “Editorial,” 4.

<sup>261</sup> On Beckett the minimalist, see Albert Cook, “Minimalism, Silence, and the Representation of Passion and Power: Beckett in Context,” *Centennial Review* 38, no. 3 (1994): 579-88. On Hemingway, see Murray Roston, “Minimalism and the Hemingway Hero,” 118-148 in *Modernist Patterns in Literature and the Visual Arts* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

<sup>262</sup> Madison Smartt Bell, “Less is Less: The Dwindling American Short Story,” *Harper's*, April 1986, 4, 9.

John Barth offered perhaps the best description in an essay for the *New York Times*. By “minimalism,” he explained:

I mean the flowering of the (North) American short story (in particular the kind of terse, oblique, realistic or hyperrealistic, slightly plotted, extrospective, cool-surfaced fiction associated in the last 5 to 10 years with such excellent writers as Frederick Barthelme, Ann Beattie, Raymond Carver, Bobbie Ann Mason, James Robison, Mary Robison and Tobias Wolff, and both praised and damned under such labels as “K-Mart realism,” “hick chic,” “Diet-Pepsi minimalism” and “post-Vietnam, post-literary, postmodernist blue-collar neo-early Hemingwayism”).<sup>263</sup>

A capacious definition to be sure, but then it was an eclectic group: Beattie, modeling herself on John Cheever, was writing character studies of the new suburbia; Carver, heavily edited by Gordon Lish, was redefining the value of radical omission; and Bobbie Ann Mason, who received critical acclaim for her first collection of short stories, *Shiloh* (1982), was leading a renaissance in regionalist fiction. Thus, by the mid-1980s, the term “minimalism” referred to a specific cadre of American writers, mostly writers of short fiction, who described domestic life in simple, terse, and yet highly-crafted prose. For both Buford and Barth, “minimalism” referred to both form and content, or, more accurately, to a relationship between form and content: to a simple, accessible style that was dictated by the familiar, domestic subject matter.

During the 1980s, the NEA panels rewarded these writers again and again. Half of the writers Barth listed, and other minimalist writers such as Richard Ford and Tobias Wolff, received grants from the NEA Literature Program during their lifetimes: the 1980s delivered federal grants to Barthelme (1979), Carver (1980), Ford (1980, 1986), Mason (1983), Jayne

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<sup>263</sup> Barth, “A Few Words About Minimalism,” 1.

Anne Phillips (1985), and Tobias Wolff (1985).<sup>264</sup> This statistic may not seem so remarkable at first glance, but when we consider that grants are awarded to just two to five percent of applicants, the fact that minimalist writers dominate the decade's list of awards seems all the more significant.<sup>265</sup> Such consistent form of state support suggests that the NEA played an integral role in shaping and promoting this trend in American letters. Why might minimalism have appealed to the NEA juries? Minimalism represented a down-home, readable (and yet highly crafted), regionally-diverse movement that could justify government expenditure on the arts in tough economic times. In other words, what was unique about literary minimalism—a movement that was supported during this crisis period—was that it collapsed the boundaries between avant-garde and kitsch. It was representational art that was nonetheless experimental and, as McGurl has argued, resolutely self-reflexive. Minimalism also emerged at a pivotal point in American history, namely a moment of renewed discussion of the nation's most damaging and polarizing foreign policy initiative: the war in Vietnam.

#### BACK IN THE WORLD: MINMALISM, MASON, AND THE MEMORY OF VIETNAM

Thus far, I have argued that during the 1980s, a shift in the NEA's agenda towards the funding of accessible, realist fiction coincided with the development of a new form of realism, termed minimalism, such that these two cultural initiatives came into alliance and became

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<sup>264</sup> "Creative Writing Fellows" *NEA Literature Fellowships: Forty Years of Supporting American Writers*.

<sup>265</sup> Stoll, "The NEA Literature Fellowships Turn Forty," 5.

mutually sustaining. But the 1980s also brought about a third development in American culture that should be triangulated with these first two: the Vietnam War's belated resurfacing, like a repressed memory, in the national conversation. In the late 1970s and the early 1980s, publishing houses like Avon and Ballantine began publishing war narratives, PBS released a miniseries on the war, and two court cases pitted veterans against the manufacturers of Agent Orange.<sup>266</sup> These developments provide the cultural context for some of the first literary accounts of the war, including Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977) and Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato* (1979). Meanwhile, psychiatrists began to develop a vocabulary for trauma, based on the experiences of Vietnam veterans; the psychological and aesthetic attributes that emerged would soon be consolidated under the rubric of trauma studies.<sup>267</sup>

I introduce Vietnam not in order to present a comprehensive claim about the representation of this war in American culture—such an argument is beyond the scope of this chapter—but rather because post-Vietnam America is the fertile terrain upon which the debates I have been tracking—between realism and anti-realism, between populism and elitism—play out.<sup>268</sup> The post-Vietnam era serves as an important cultural context for my analysis for two

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<sup>266</sup> See Kalí Tal's *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 62.

<sup>267</sup> The third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III-R)*, published in 1987, was the first edition to include a definition of "post-traumatic stress disorder," an anxiety disorder marked by "re-experiencing the traumatic event, avoidance of stimuli associated with the event or numbing of general responsiveness, and increased arousal." *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. rev. (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 1987), 247.

<sup>268</sup> For more comprehensive studies of the representations of Vietnam in American literature and culture, see Philip D. Beidler's *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1982), Susan Jefford's *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) and Thomas Myers' *Walking Point: American Narratives of Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).



reasons. First, authors interested in describing the war experience, some of whom were veterans themselves, employed the kind of reduced, anti-heroic language that, since Hemingway, had seemed appropriate for war writing. They sought to express by a certain verbal terseness the emotional or spiritual vacuity that characterizes the Vietnam veteran, and these stylistic choices marked them as minimalists. Barth, in the *Times* essay discussed earlier, picked up on the connection between minimalist style and war trauma, citing, “Our national hangover from the Vietnam War, felt by many to be a trauma literally and figuratively unspeakable” as a key factor in the development of literary minimalism. He continues:

“I don't want to talk about it” is the characteristic attitude of “Nam” veterans in the fiction of Ann Beattie, Jayne Anne Phillips and Bobbie Ann Mason—as it is among many of their real-life counterparts (and as it was among their numberless 20th-century forerunners, especially after the First World War). This is, of course, one of the two classic attitudes to trauma, the other being its opposite, and it can certainly conduce to hedged, nonintrospective, even minimalist discourse: one remembers Hemingway's early story “Soldier's Home.”<sup>269</sup>

As Barth notes, an understated, even recalcitrant style characterizes earlier examples of wartime writing, and Vietnam brought about a return to this kind of literary style. If minimalism was a movement supposedly defined by the retreat from public life to the private sphere, then it is surprising how many minimalist authors wrote about the war: Richard Ford, Tobias Wolff, Jayne Anne Phillips, and, of course, Bobbie Ann Mason. Many wrote short stories, but some

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Both Beidler and Myers focus on the anti-realist aspect of Vietnam literature, while I am interested in those texts written in the verisimilar style, what we often call “realist.”

<sup>269</sup> Barth, “A Few Words,” 1.

transitioned to novels, in which they maintained a realist style.<sup>270</sup> In 1984, Phillips published *Machine Dreams*, a multigenerational family novel that concludes with the disappearance of the son, Billy, in the jungles of Southeast Asia. That same year, Wolff, himself a Vietnam veteran, published his first novella *The Barracks Thief*, which tells a story about basic training during the final year of the war. Both Phillips and Wolff are multiple winners of NEA Literary grants, first in 1978 and then again in 1985. The second state grants, which followed *Machine Dreams* and *The Barracks Thief*, are especially notable because they reward fictions that paint portraits of a disillusioned American nation. But these stories also suggest that the nation can be reunified around the losses of Vietnam, losses shared by all citizens regardless of their participation in the war: Phillips paints a detailed portrait of living in the South Asian jungle, as if such sensory detail could spark sympathy in the reader, while Wolff's narrator, musing on "what bad shots" his fellow recruits are, eventually reconciles himself to his position within this community: "After all, they belonged to the same army I belonged to."<sup>271</sup> On the whole, these stories make a clear distinction between the foibles of the U.S. government and the strength and endurance of U.S. citizens, or, put differently, a distinction between the state and the nation.

This transition from the discussion of state action to the depiction of national healing during the late 1970s and early 1980s speaks to the second way in which Vietnam influenced the literature I examine here. Post-Vietnam America also witnessed a change in the political climate that impinged on artistic production: a resurgence of populism in American politics. Populism, as

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<sup>270</sup> These novels are the stylistic opposites of anti-realist texts like *Going After Cacciato*, cited earlier, or anti-realist text that serve as oblique allegories for Vietnam, such as Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985) or Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). Notably, neither McCarthy nor Pynchon ever won an NEA grant.

<sup>271</sup> Tobias Wolff, *The Barracks Thief* (New York: Ecco Press, 1984), 90.

Michael Federici notes, eludes easy definition, but it is often is marked by “suspicion of elites,” “faith in the common sense and virtue of the ordinary people,” “preference for simplicity versus complexity,” and “anti-intellectualism,” among other things.<sup>272</sup> There were several reasons that populism—which has ebbed and flowed in American culture since the eighteenth century—reemerged in the postwar era, but the most salient one for my purposes is popular opposition to the Vietnam War, which pitted the people against the U.S. government, until “[p]opular pressure generated by the media and antiwar protestors significantly altered U.S. foreign policy.”<sup>273</sup> These same populist sentiments eventually made their way into state government, and the most successful politicians were the ones who could make the words of the people their own. For instance, in *Age of Fracture*, Daniel Rodgers shows how the populist emphasis of President Jimmy Carter’s rhetoric gave way to a new kind of populism in President Ronald Reagan’s speeches, one encapsulated by the phrase “We the people.” As Rodgers puts it, “He [Reagan] gave the nation’s freedoms and its future back to ‘the people.’ It was their seamless history that he painted in verbal miniatures, their hopes he claimed to enunciate. Reagan performed the part of identification with the people far more effortlessly and with vastly less inner contradiction than did his rival, the populist Carter [...] The terms in which Reagan referred to the people were

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<sup>272</sup> Federici’s taxonomy also includes: “suspicion of metropolitan society,” “idyllic assessment of agricultural life,” “reverence for religion,” “conspiracy theory,” “staunch defense of small property holders versus corporations,” “fear of trust and monopolies,” “sectarianism,” “mistrust of science and technology,” and “majoritarian democracy.” Michael P. Federici, *The Challenge of Populism: The Rise of Right-Wing Democratism in Postwar America* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 35-6.

<sup>273</sup> Federici, *The Challenge of Populism*, 103. Federici offers several reasons for postwar populism, including the threat of Communism and Cold War culture, the development of free market ideology in reaction to the rise of the welfare state, and the state’s “usurpation of local and community power” (56). See Federici, 43-56.

instinctively expansive and inclusive.”<sup>274</sup> This, then, was the political (and rhetorical) climate in which the NEA and writers like Mason were operating: a world in which “the people” and the “popular” were equated with “the good.”<sup>275</sup>

As I discussed earlier, the populist dimension in 1980s politics put new pressure on the NEA to fund accessible fiction and, generally, art that appealed to a large audience. I would also contend that writers, aware of this political environment, felt pressure to produce fiction for the people rather than fiction for elites; Mason’s self-reflections, with which I began this essay, demonstrate this awareness. This expectation would be especially relevant to authors who wrote about Vietnam, a national tragedy in which all citizens were at once complicit and victimized. And it seems that no writer felt the burden of these expectations more acutely than Bobbie Ann Mason. Her fiction, then, is valuable as a case study of the ways in which aesthetic form registers and responds to changes in politics and culture. Her novel *In Country* is especially valuable because of the way it engages with other forms of art, namely the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, that are also sites of debate about aesthetic form, artistic autonomy, and popular appeal.

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<sup>274</sup> Daniel Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 34-35. Rodgers astutely notes that despite the collectivist connotation of a phrase like “We the people,” Reagan often demonstrated an “impulse to disaggregate and individualize the people” and rarely showed them “working together” (36).

<sup>275</sup> Simon Frith describes how the political and moral connotations of popular culture shifted from the midcentury—when, starting with Adorno, any element of mass culture was seen as morally suspect—to the end of the twentieth century: “More recently, though, partly in response to the implicit elitism of this position, partly as an effect of the depoliticisation of cultural studies as they enter the humanities curriculum, a new argument has emerged: if it’s popular, it must be good!” (162). As Frith notes, this overcorrection obscures some of the troubling aspects of popular consumption, not to mention preempts any kind of aesthetic evaluation. See Simon Frith, “The Good, the Bad, and the Indifferent: Defending Popular Culture from the Populists,” in *The Populism Reader*, ed. Lars Bang Larsen, Cristina Ricupero, and Nicholas Schafhausen (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2005), 161-172.

Though Bobbie Ann Mason has rejected the “minimalist” label in essays and interviews, she acknowledges that she is “expressing the terse, compact language of her region” and jokes that she limits herself to a set of 600 words.<sup>276</sup> This is a stylistic choice fraught with social, if not expressly political, meaning. Mason is quite forthcoming about her desire to produce accessible fiction, fiction that appeals to and addresses the lives of the people she grew up with in Mayfield, Kentucky, and she laments the fact that the very people for whom and about whom she writes feel so distant from literature and artistic culture. “I find it odd that I’m writing for an audience that is particularly well educated,” she has said. “I’m sorry the general public can’t read what I write. I think they are capable of it, but they don’t have access to it. People don’t know they can go to a library and read. I think they feel a class inhibition. [...] A factory worker is not going to go to the opera. It’s just unthinkable.”<sup>277</sup> If opponents of the NEA were looking for testimony to the disconnection between high art and the lives of working-class citizens, they might not find a better quotation than the one Mason provides here.

Yet Mason’s writing, in particular her novel *In Country*, which she wrote from 1983-1985 while on an NEA grant, has been crucial to the endurance of the NEA’s Literature Program. *In Country* is the story of Samantha Hughes, a recent high school graduate living in the fictional small town of Hopewell, Kentucky with her uncle Emmet, a Vietnam veteran with great culinary skill and a penchant for cross-dressing. Both a *Bildungsroman* and a narrative of

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<sup>276</sup> In an interview, Mason explains, “I’m not sure what’s meant by minimalism. I’m not sure if it means something that is just so spare that there is hardly anything there, or if it describes something that is deliberately pared down with great artistic effort, or if it’s just a misnomer for what happens in any good short story, which is economy” (119-120). Bonnie Lyons and Bill Oliver, “An Interview with Bobbie Ann Mason,” in *Bobbie Ann Mason: A Study of the Short Fiction*, ed. Albert Wilhelm (New York, Twayne, 1998), 110-27. Rebein calls Mason, Phillips, and Ford “strayed minimalists,” and argues that even their longform writing displays “a certain residue of minimalist technique” (*Hicks*, 69).

<sup>277</sup> Qtd. in Wilhelm, *Bobbie Ann Mason*, 177.

national healing, *In Country* explores the aftermath of the Vietnam War through the lens of Sam's quest to understand her father, a man who was killed in Vietnam before Sam was born. Her investigation involves sorting through relics of her father—letters, photographs, journal entries—informally interviewing Vietnam veterans, researching the effects of Agent Orange, watching “M\*A\*S\*H” nightly, and, in a fit of frustration, camping out at Cawood's Pond in an effort to relate to her father's experience in the jungle of Southeast Asia. Though she knows that “They probably didn't have these trees over there,” Sam nonetheless imagines herself into her father's shoes: “What did the jungle do to them?” she wonders, “Humping the boonies. Here I am, she thought. In country.”<sup>278</sup>

Of course, the country in which Sam finds herself is, in fact, the United States, and the double meaning of the novel's title becomes clear when Sam's figurative journey—from adolescence to adulthood, from ignorance to knowledge—becomes a literal one. Sam, Uncle Emmet, and Sam's grandmother take off on a road trip from Kentucky to Washington, D.C., determined to find Sam's father's name on the newly erected Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The novel opens on the road, on I-64, with Sam at the wheel: “Sam wasn't experienced at city driving, but the interstate is easy. She could glide like this all the way across America” (Mason, *In Country*, 3). On the interstate, Sam finds herself away from home for the first time and yet, paradoxically, more at home than she expected. Later, when the family rests at the Holiday Inn, Sam sits “watching the traffic—and endless river of it [...] Everything in America is going on here, on the road. Sam likes the feeling of strangeness. They are at a crossroads: the interstate with traffic headed east and west, and the state road with the north-south traffic. She's in limbo, stationed right in the center of this enormous amount of energy. The whine of the diesel trucks is

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<sup>278</sup> Bobbie Ann Mason, *In Country* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1985, reprinted 2005), 210. Hereafter cited in text by page number.

like the background on a rock song” (Mason, *In Country*, 17). Here, Mason draws a map of America with deliberate vagueness: the cardinal directions stand in for states, borders blur into endless roadways, and the language itself—“everything,” “strangeness,” “going on”—is unspecified and vague. The scene is set to industrial noise that sounds like a “rock song,” the kind of music disseminated across the country on the national airwaves.

For a writer seemingly invested in the particularities of regional culture, Mason’s vision of America is surprisingly monolithic. But America, when viewed from the highway, looks as perfectly uniform as the following sentence implies: “Exxon, Chevron, and Sunoco loom up, big faces on stilts. There’s a Country Kitchen, a McDonald’s, and a Stuckey’s. Sam has heard that Stuckey’s is terrible and the Country Kitchen is good” (Mason, *In Country*, 3). This sentence is quintessential Mason: syntactically simple, linguistically blunt (“terrible” and “good”), and packed with references to the corporate and popular culture of 1980s America. Indeed, Mason’s fiction is highly allusive, but the allusions are to popular music (from Motown to Bruce Springsteen), corporate retailers, and broadcast television. Since the 1980s, critics have grappled with Mason’s engagement with mass American culture, but none has placed her allusions in the context of debates about public funding for American artists.<sup>279</sup> The set of references described above demonstrates both the familiarity of Mason’s fictional and its legibility for a broad reading

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<sup>279</sup> For critical takes on the function of popular culture in minimalist fiction see, for example, Evan Brier, “Reading in the 1980s: *In Country*, Minimalism, and the Age of Niches” *Literature Interpretation Theory* 19 (2008): 231-47 and Stephen N. doCarmo, “Bombs from Coke Cans: Appropriating Mass Culture in Bobbie Ann Mason’s *In Country*,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 36, no. 5 (2003): 589-99. For more on popular culture and populism, see Frith.

audience.<sup>280</sup> Mason's engagement with popular culture is one way in which she attempts to realize the fantasy of accessible fiction that she articulates in her interviews.

*In Country* furthers the case for realist style's populist implications by deliberately engaging the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, a work of art that raised similar questions about the relationship between avant-garde art and the public audience. This art project was also one that, like the NEA's state-funded fictions, found itself implicated in debates about what art "by the people" or "for the people" should look like. In the early 1980s, the very moment that the U.S. government was reexamining its role in the development and promotion of the arts, a small group of private citizens was developing a different model of public, or rather popular, support. In 1979, Jan C. Scruggs and Bob Doubeck, two veterans of the War in Vietnam, had founded the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF) with the goal of raising a memorial in honor of those who died in Vietnam by Veterans Day 1982. They intended to take no government money but claimed that the memorial would be funded by the "American people," and that it would truly be a "people's memorial."<sup>281</sup> To that end, the group sent out mass mailing after mass mailing, and thanks to the help of some influential public figures—including Nancy Reagan, Bob Hope, and H. Ross Perot—the money trickled in until the group had raised the approximately ten million dollars necessary to finance the project. Once they had secured the site for the memorial, the VVMF held an open design competition, in the interest of making the process as democratic as

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<sup>280</sup> Leslie White presents a similar argument about the function of popular culture in Mason's work. Whereas in "*Shiloh*, popular culture most often functions divisively, isolating the characters or tranquilizing them [...] in her novel, Mason shows how popular art, especially popular music, can be a means of continuity and communication" (162). Leslie White, "The Function of Popular Culture in Bobbie Ann Mason's *Shiloh and Other Stories* and *In Country*," *Southern Quarterly* 26 (1998): 69-69. Rpt. in Wilhelm, *Bobbie Ann Mason*, 152-62.

<sup>281</sup> Jan C. Scruggs and Joel Swerdlow, *To Heal a Nation: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (New York: Harper & Row 1985), 8, 23.



possible. The judges for the competition, a group of professional sculptors and architects, ultimately selected the design of Maya Lin, then a 21-year-old Yale undergraduate. Lin envisioned granite walls, bearing the names of fallen soldiers, which would be cut into the earth of the Constitution Gardens. The judges were unanimous in their decision, but the original sponsors of the project were less certain, and some were outright opposed. Opponents of the design called it a “black gash of shame,” a “tribute to Jane Fonda,” and “Orwellian glop.”<sup>282</sup> Upon first hearing of the design, Ross Perot reportedly shouted, “It’s not heroic [...] It’s something for New York intellectuals [...] It’s twenty-first century art.”<sup>283</sup> Perot was not without a point. At first glance, Lin’s design seemed to place her in a tradition of minimalist sculpture, of which Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc* was a representative example and to which Lin’s design was frequently (and inaccurately) compared.<sup>284</sup> Though Lin’s design is not minimalist, it nonetheless challenged conventional ideas about public art and specifically about memorial sculpture. The design was non-figurative and, in keeping with the request of Scruggs and the VVMF, it was

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<sup>282</sup> The citations are from, respectively, Tom Carhart, qtd. in Elizabeth Hess, “Vietnam: Memorials of Misfortune,” in *Unwinding the Vietnam War: From War into Peace*, ed. Reese Williams (Seattle: Real Comet Press, 1987), 265; Tom Wolfe, “Art Disputes War: The Battle of the Vietnam Memorial,” *Washington Post*, October 13, 1982, B4; and “Stop That Monument,” *National Review* 18 September 1981, 1064.

<sup>283</sup> Qtd. in Scruggs and Swerdlow, *To Heal a Nation*, 68.

<sup>284</sup> Richard Wollheim was the first to use the term “Minimal Art” in 1965. He used it to describe the new “sculptural” movement in the plastic arts that had recently emerged in the New York art world and that, in the words of Daniel Marzona, exhibited “a reduced formal vocabulary, serialism, non-relational compositional techniques, [and] the use of novel, industrially-produced materials and industrial production processes.” Notable Minimalist artists include Sol LeWitt, Richard Serra, and Robert Smithson. See Daniel Marzona, *Minimal Art* (Köln: Taschen, 2006), 6. Whereas minimalist visual art of the 1960s is been abstract, erudite, and the sign, to some, of an unbridgeable gap between the elite art world and the general American public, minimalist fiction of the 1980s presents exactly the opposite dynamic.

intentionally apolitical. “The Memorial says exactly what we wanted to say about Vietnam,” said Scruggs, “absolutely nothing.”<sup>285</sup>

But many people—veterans, bureaucrats, artists, and critics—wanted the Memorial to say *something*, or at the very least, to look like something. To that end, Frederick Hart, the second runner-up in the design competition, was commissioned to design a figurative statue that would be placed in relation to Lin’s monument. Hart, who had apprenticed under Felix de Weldon, proposed a suite of three life-size sculptures, each of which represented a veteran of a different ethnicity. Along with an American flag, Hart’s “Three Servicemen Statue” would provide the memorial grounds with the necessary dose of heroism. Unsurprisingly, there was no love lost between Hart and Lin: Hart faulted Lin’s design for being “intentionally not meaningful” and claimed, “It doesn’t relate to ordinary people,” while Lin argued, “Three men standing there before the world—it’s trite. It’s a generalization, a simplification. Hart gives you an image—he’s illustrating a book.”<sup>286</sup>

What we see in this exchange of verbal barbs is the reprisal of the very debates about accessible art that plagued the NEA in the early 1980s and that motivated support for the minimalist movement in literature. Hart believes that abstract art abdicates its responsibility to please the average America viewer.<sup>287</sup> Defenders of Lin’s work, for their part, believed that the

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<sup>285</sup> Scruggs and Swerdlow, *To Heal a Nation*, 69.

<sup>286</sup> Qtd. in Scruggs and Swerdlow, *To Heal a Nation*, 129.

<sup>287</sup> During the 1989 controversies over the exhibitions featuring the work of Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe, Hart contributed an op-ed to the *Washington Post*, “Contemporary Art Is Perverted Art,” in which endorsed the calls to cut the NEA’s budget, claiming, “The flaw is not with a public that refuses to nourish the arts. Rather it is with a practice of art that refuses to nourish the public.” Frederick E. Hart, “Contemporary Art is Perverted Art,” *Washington Post* 22 August 1989, A19.

radical openness of Lin's design spoke to the American ideal of freedom, and argued that Hart's works was "a Starsky and Hutch pose" that resembled "'Socialist-realist' Stalinist sculpture in Moscow."<sup>288</sup> The battle between the two sculptors demonstrates the conflict between realist style—seen as popular and accessible, but perhaps propagandistic—and abstract style—seen as inaccessible, elitist, but perhaps more aesthetically pleasing. In the interests of expediting the Memorial's construction, a compromise was arranged and Hart's statue was added to the Constitution Gardens two years after the dedication of Lin's walls.

But this comparison between abstract and realist styles—or, more precisely, non-figurative and figurative sculptures—obscures the inclusive effect of Lin's monument, an effect that explains the generally positive reaction by the American public once the sculpture was realized.<sup>289</sup> While many critics have tried to explain the monument's appeal by calling attention to its nontraditional formal elements, including its "antiphallic form [...] designed by a person unlikely to reiterate traditional codes of war remembrance" and its "cunning inversion of monumental conventions," I would suggest that the monument is far less aggressive than these analyses suggest; it is closer to literary minimalism than to the tradition of minimalism in the visual arts.<sup>290</sup> Lin was working in the land art tradition, a style that involves working harmoniously with the sculpture's environment.<sup>291</sup> This is the opposite of Serra's alienating,

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<sup>288</sup> Qtd. in Scruggs and Swerdlow, *To Heal a Nation*, 129.

<sup>289</sup> Scruggs and Swerdlow, *To Heal a Nation*, 159.

<sup>290</sup> The first citation is from Marita Sturken, "The Wall, the Screen, and the Image: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial" *Representations* 35 (1991): 123; the second is from W. J. T. Mitchell, "The Violence of Public Art: 'Do the Right Thing,'" *Critical Inquiry* 16, no. 4 (1990): 888.

<sup>291</sup> Land art, a movement that arose within and alongside Minimal art in the 1960s, is characterized by the use of natural materials (wood, water, stone). Sculptures arise organically from the landscape, taking their forms from the land that surrounds them. Such work is site-specific and often degrades over time. Though there is significant overlap between Minimal art

avant-gardist gesture. Whereas *Tilted Arc* was ultimately removed from the Federal Plaza in Manhattan in 1989 because, to quote art critic Hilton Kramer, it provoked “the most negative and disruptive response [...] with an arrogant disregard for the mental well-being and physical convenience of the people who were obliged to come into contact with the work in the course of their daily employment,” Lin’s monument provokes a positive response by inviting the visitor to engage with the Memorial.<sup>292</sup> The intensely reflective walls make all visitors part of the Memorial’s effect, opening the sculpture up to the viewer in such a way that any alienating effects are undercut.<sup>293</sup> The visitor is now part of the Memorial, and he or she is charged with interpreting and communicating the Memorial’s significance. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial certainly speaks to the American public (Lin rightly predicted that visitors “are probably going to cry and cry and cry,”) but the public also speaks back.<sup>294</sup>

Mason illustrates the dialogue between visitor and monument in the novel’s final pages. *In Country* culminates with a visit to the Memorial, a sculpture that at first seems foreboding. Echoing Carhart, Mason describes the sculpture: “It is massive, a black gash in a hillside, like a vein of coal exposed and then polished with polyurethane” (Mason, *In Country*, 239). Sam’s

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and land art (think of the work of Robert Smithson, for example), land art need not be Minimalist. See “Minimal Art and Land Art” and “Minimal Artist and Land Artists,” 127-160 in William Malpas, *Minimal Art and Artists in the 1960s and After* (Kent, UK: Crescent Moon Publishing, 2005).

<sup>292</sup> Hilton Kramer, “Is Art Above the Laws of Decency?” *New York Times* 2 July 1989. Rpt. in *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts*, ed. Richard Bolton (New York: New Press, 1992), 51.

<sup>293</sup> Arthur Danto has also emphasized the reflective nature of the granite in his 1985 review: “The walls reflect their [Hart’s servicemen’s] obsessed gaze, as they reflect the flag to which the servicemen’s back is also turned, as they reflect the Monument and the Memorial.” Arthur C. Danto, “The Vietnam Veterans Memorial” *The Nation* 31 August 1985, 153.

<sup>294</sup> Qtd. in Louis Menand, “The Reluctant Memorialist: Maya Lin” in *American Studies* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2002), 277.

grandmother, the perfect mouthpiece for working-class, rural America, reacts with the same incredulity as the Memorial's real-life opponents: "'It doesn't show up good,' Mamaw says anxiously. 'It's just a hole in the ground'" (Mason, *In Country*, 239). As the family advances, however, the memorial becomes more accessible. Standing at the center of the V, Sam notices that the walls, which first looked "like the wings of an abstract bird, huge and headless" (Mason, *In Country*, 239), now remind her of "the white wings of the shopping mall in Paducah" (Mason, *In Country*, 240). With this simile, Sam removes the Memorial from its context in the art world and resituates it in her hometown. This figurative relocation reflects Sam's new sense of ownership over this national monument; as she puts it, "It feels like giving birth to this wall" (Mason, *In Country*, 240). In this scene, in which the state is entirely absent, Mason depicts the memorial as the "people's memorial" that Scruggs and the VVMF intended.

The Wall's legibility, demonstrated by Sam's engagement with the list of names, augments this point about the monument's populist potential. First, Sam finds her father's names, and her grandmother takes a photo of Sam's face next to the etching. But a strange and indeed uncanny moment follows shortly afterward, when Sam finds her own name on the wall. "SAM A HUGHES. [...] She touches her own name. How odd it feels, as though all the names in America have been used to decorate this wall" (Mason, *In Country*, 244-5). Mason had this same experience during her first visit to the Memorial in 1983, when she found her own name on the Wall. She writes of this strange encounter, "More Bobby Masons. I knew then that Vietnam was my story too, and it was every American's story. Finally, I felt I had a right to tell a small part of that story. Seeing the mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, wives, and children—the families—there that rainy day, I knew we were all in it together."<sup>295</sup> These moments of self-recognition, as

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<sup>295</sup> Bobbie Ann Mason, "A Note From Bobbie Ann Mason," *In Country*, 5-6.

Mason describes them both in her fiction and in her essays, are also moments of radical inclusion in which distinctions based on age, gender, and life experience are collapsed in the interests of national unity. This is the fantasy of aesthetic populism, one that suggests that art for the people, by the people can unify a nation that has been divided by past wounds and current political debates. Mason's novel ends by suggesting how national healing can begin.

## READING AND REFLECTION

The final scene of *In Country* is also, fundamentally, a scene of reading, and I want to end by proposing that reading, in this scene, not only facilitates these interpersonal connections but also serves as an allegory for the kind of literary production for which both Mason and the NEA advocated in the 1980s. As I have argued, what at first looks like Sam's engagement with an avant-garde, anti-realist piece of art is ultimately her discovery of its legibility. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is a textual monument, covered with names that are familiar to many readers. Sam, like Mason herself, feels part of a national narrative about Vietnam when she reads her name on the Wall. These names, which require no interpretation or instruction, stand in for the realist mode of literature, which staged a return in the last decades of the twentieth century. Mason depicts not only a nation of citizens, coming together in mourning, but also a nation of readers, inquisitive and optimistic. This utopian vision is the kind of dream that, in the nation's darker moments, appealed to artists and audiences alike.

It is this fantasy that stymied, if only for a few years, the culture wars that would explode in the early 1990s and that would once again threaten the NEA's existence.<sup>296</sup> In 1995, when the

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<sup>296</sup> For documentary accounts of the culture wars, see Bolton, ed., *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts*.

Endowment's budget once again came under siege, writers such as E. L. Doctorow, Walter Mosley, and Mason herself met with Congress and made the case for the importance of the NEA Literature Fellowships, primarily by calling attention to what Mason describes, in the passage I quoted at the beginning of this essay, as literature's "long-reaching, positive effects on the culture."<sup>297</sup> Mason and her compatriots successfully argued for the endurance of the fellowship program, and when Congress voted to eliminate all individual grants to artists, writers represented the lone exception. In tandem with education initiatives like Operation Homecoming and the Big Read, the grants program continues to flourish, but the threat of funding cuts is never far from administrators' minds.<sup>298</sup>

The fantasy of aesthetic populism may have saved the grants program, but there is also something lost when state-funded fiction simply reflects back the current reality of American life. If Greenberg, when he first delineated the division between high and low art, was too quick to dismiss art that responded to the conditions of "universal literacy," Mason, when she reinscribes this division, perhaps goes too far in the other direction.<sup>299</sup> "I think [popular culture is] very close to people and it reflects what they feel and believe," she once said in an interview, "Certain people denigrate it because it's not high art, but I don't happen to feel that way. I don't want to have an elitist attitude about the culture. It's very real, it means something to a whole lot of people, and I can't ignore that ... [.]"<sup>300</sup> Her responsiveness, even indebtedness, to popular

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<sup>297</sup> "NEA Literary Fellowships: Forty Years of Supporting American Writers," 14.

<sup>298</sup> See "NEA Literary Fellowships: Forty Years of Supporting American Writers," 9. Mason's participation in Operation Homecoming, a writing workshop for U.S. veterans founded in 2004 that is funded by the NEA, demonstrates her commitment to these broader cultural effects.

<sup>299</sup> Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kistch," 25.

<sup>300</sup> Qtd. in Wilhelm, *Bobbie Ann Mason*, 153.

taste dictates her aesthetic choices and, as we have seen, the aesthetic of much state-funded fiction.

For the NEA, in its later years, and for Mason, art for the people must reflect their lives back to them, or else they may not consume art at all. For Greenberg, the reflective nature of mimetic art was precisely its danger: such art was “pre-digested” and ready for the “spectator’s unreflective enjoyment.”<sup>301</sup> Greenberg’s provocation encourages us to ask what other models of art might serve the nation: must the state produce only familiar, accessible art, fiction that, as Mason says, “reflects what they [the people] feel and believe?” Or is there something to be gained by challenging those feelings and beliefs, by producing art that is alienating or unfamiliar? There may be something troubling about a version of aesthetic populism that encourages only recognition of likeness rather than engagement with difference or difficulty. What might we see when we turn away from a recognizable reflection or a familiar name? A different picture of the nation may emerge, dynamic and in some ways even foreign, but one that could nonetheless prompt reflection of a different kind.

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<sup>301</sup> The full passage, which is a commentary on the Russian painter Repin (in Greenberg’s terms, a “leading exponent of Russian academic kitsch,” 27), is as follows: “In Repin, on the other hand, the ‘reflected effect has already been included in the picture, ready for the spectator’s unreflective enjoyment. [...] Repin pre-digests art for the spectator and spares him effort, provides him with a short cut to the pleasure of art that detours what is necessarily difficult in genuine art” (Greenberg, 28) In a reprinted version of this essay, Greenberg said he had been mistaken in using Repin as a representative example of kistch.



## Conclusion

### Contemporary Literature and Compromise Aesthetics

In her 2014 story collection *Can't and Won't*, Lydia Davis writes a series of letters. They are addressed not to friends or family members but, strangely, to institutions and to those who represent them: to a “Peppermint Candy Company,” to a “Hotel Manager,” to the “President of the American Biographical Institute, Inc.”<sup>302</sup> These are chatty letters, unfolding in the loose, discursive style that characterizes many of the stories in the collection and that represents a departure from the tight, epigrammatic form that has won Davis such acclaim. (She is, most recently, the winner of the 2013 Man Booker International Award.<sup>303</sup>) In these letters, Davis takes issue with small errors of language. The hotel has misspelled “scrod” on its restaurant menu; the Biographical Institute has misspelled (or misidentified) her name as “Lydia Danj.” This is Davis at her most charmingly querulous.

One letter, though, is not nitpicking but instead an expression of gratitude. “Letter to a Foundation,” one of the longer stories in the collection, is, in the narrator’s words, a “letter of thanks” by way of a reflection on the work of teaching and writing. The narrator, we learn, has won a grant from the unnamed foundation, and it allowed her, those many years ago, to take a leave from teaching. The letter is addressed to Frank—this would be Frank Conroy, the director of the NEA Literature Program for most of the 1980s—and it describes the effect of the 1989 NEA grant that Davis won on the strength of her fourth story collection, *Break It Down* (1986). “I think you did say you were curious about what it was like to receive this grant” she recalls

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<sup>302</sup> Lydia Davis, *Can't and Won't* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 227, 279. Hereafter cited in text.

<sup>303</sup> She is also the winner of the MacArthur award (2003) and an American Academy and Sciences fellowship (2005). Her *Collected Stories* (2009) was short-listed for the National Book Award.

(Davis, 181). She recalls, “You told me to call you Frank. At that moment, I was prepared to do anything you seemed to want me to do, because I was afraid that if you were not careful at that moment, everything would be ruined and the grant would vanish” (Davis, 181). She hurries to the bus, reflecting on her good news. At lunch she realizes, too late, that she could have ordered a “certain favorite salad for \$11” (Davis, 182) instead of her usual sandwich. “I was feeling such relief. I wanted to tell the Foundation about this immense relief. But then I thought that of course it must be obvious to you. You probably hear this from every person you help” (Davis, 182). Later in the story, she buys an excessively expensive sweater. For the narrator, the grant is primarily a form of financial aid, a sort of welfare check for writers. She is the passive recipient—“A recipient is not very active or important. The Foundation was active, giving me the money” (Davis, 201)—and she cannot shake the feeling that her award, and thus her life, is “arbitrary” (Davis, 205). Like any of Endowment’s recipient surveys, the story is an honest and straightforward expression of the relationship between economics and emotional life.

The narrator, by her own admission, is perhaps too honest. “I’m not sure how truthful I can be in writing to the Foundation,” she admits, “I don’t think you want to hear that I didn’t intend to work all the time during the period of the grant” (Davis, 179-80). What does work mean in this confession? Is it the work of writing, or the work that impedes writing? “Teaching has always been so difficult,” she relates. “At times, it has been a disaster. I’m not afraid of hard work, and I’m used to it, but this particular kind of work, the kind of teaching I do, has been crushing and almost debilitating” (Davis, 183). Davis describes the joys and anxieties of undergraduate teaching that are familiar to any faculty member: the repetitive commute, the stack of papers that are at once promising and dreadful, the joy of knowing individual students and the terror of students as a collective, and the sweet relief when the teaching week is done.

The grant is her reprieve from the work of teaching, but it is also a reprieve from work itself: the effortful actions that sustain her life. The story itself—a belated, unstructured, and barely-fictionalized account of a grant winner’s thoughts and feelings—negates the idea of writing as work, a craft that one must struggle to master and then struggle to use on a path towards success. In our contemporary moment, creative work must appear effortless, its execution its own reward.<sup>304</sup> In this case, the work of teaching gets in the way of the non-work of writing

“Letter to the Foundation” demonstrates another change in the representation of creative work, at least in how it is represented by state-funded writers of fiction. If creative work is seen as synonymous with labor, and then seen as antithetical to labor, and then seen as synonymous with labor again, this story represents yet another swing of the pendulum in the direction of antithesis. But Davis’s story—and her oeuvre more generally—represents the relationship between the NEA and contemporary writers not just thematically but also formally. Since roughly 2001, when Davis’s collection *Samuel Johnson Is Indignant* pushed her into the literary limelight, critics have remarked on her erudition, signaled most obviously by her allusions to Kafka, Foucault, Auden, and, of course, Johnson himself.<sup>305</sup> Other formal features undermine narrative convention. Characters are often anonymous; settings are left ambiguous with few if any superficial details. (No reality effect here.) French words occasionally interrupt the native language, though a definition almost always follows. At the same time, the brevity of her stories

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<sup>304</sup> An article in the magazine *Jacobin*, also from 2014, analyzes the pervasiveness of the mantra “do what you love” and the way this rhetoric suggests that “labor is not something one does for compensation, but an act of self-love.” Miya Tokumitsu, “In the Name of Love,” *Jacobin* 13 <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/01/in-the-name-of-love/>. For a scholarly analysis of this same problem, see Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>305</sup> “How W. H. Auden Spends the Night in a Friend’s House,” “Foucault and Pencil,” “Kafka Cooks Dinner,” and “Samuel Johnson is Indignant” from *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2009).

(some are a single sentence, few more than a page) and her simple (if precise) prose style make more accessible than we might expect. Some readers might find her fiction alienating, but few would find her unintelligible. You can fly through a Davis collection in a few hours. You may even pick up a bit of French along the way.

This combination of difficulty and accessibility characterizes the fiction and poetry of our contemporary moment. This is a style that I call the *compromise aesthetic*. It is the resolution of the tensions of literary history traced in the previous chapters of the dissertation and it is, I suggest, reflected and shaped by the grant standards of the NEA. Whereas in its early years the agency sought to support avant-garde, non-commercial literature, from the 1980s onward, the fellowship program supported work that seemed both aesthetically interesting and, crucially, commercially viable. The work of Bobbie Ann Mason and her contemporaries represented both a new movement in contemporary fiction, an aesthetic cutting-edge, and a return to a realist mode, a style accessible and appealing to the average American reader. This is not quite the same compromise as the one achieved by contemporary fiction writers: we would not call Davis's stories realist, although nor would we call them especially difficult. At this point in her career, Davis is widely celebrated; she is not exactly a member of the avant-garde, nor is she a mass-market success. Like fellow NEA grant-winners Jonathan Franzen and Jennifer Egan, she is the kind of writer beloved by New Yorkers and *New Yorker* readers, by educated readers and the critics who speak to and for them. We could describe this kind of fiction writer as "middlebrow," though that term does not capture the recombinatory nature of this fictional style. *Compromise aesthetic* instead reflects the compromise—and the conflict—between the competing market forces that shape the contemporary literary world.

I am not the only scholar to note the marriage of realism and experimentalism in contemporary literature, nor am I the only one to refer to this development as a kind of aesthetic compromise. In a recent essay, Rachel Greenwald-Smith brings together several critical evaluations on the hybridity of recent fiction and poetry and offers a useful description of this contemporary literary mode. “While the particularities of compromise aesthetics have varied from critic to critic, genre to genre,” she writes, “most share the foundational assumption that contemporary literature is formally interesting primarily in its efforts to produce a compromise between experimentalism and convention; difficulty and readability; and the underground and the mass market.”<sup>306</sup> Greenwald-Smith goes on to examine the historical conditions that have produced this aesthetic. While most critics attribute compromise aesthetics to literary-historical tensions between postmodernism and the MFA formalism of the 1980s, Greenwald-Smith calls for a more rigorous historicization of the style; she argues that compromise aesthetics are “symptomatic of the cultural entrenchment of neoliberalism.”<sup>307</sup> By neoliberalism, she means both the “enforced privatization, financial deregulation, and diminished social services (including arts funding) that emerged during the Reagan era”—in other words, the social and political structures that regulate the production and dissemination of culture—as well as the

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<sup>306</sup> Rachel Greenwald-Smith, “Six Propositions on Compromise Aesthetics.” [Greenwald-Smith’s article and my article on the compromise aesthetic appeared roughly simultaneously, hers in the Fall 2014 issue of \*The Account\* and mine in the Spring 2015 issue of \*American Literary History\*. \(Greenwald-Smith’s article appeared after mine had gone to press.\) I take this coincidence to be indicative of the prevalence and prominence of the compromise aesthetic; it is attracting increased critical attention. See Margaret Doherty, “State-Funded Fiction: Minimalism, National Memory, and the Return to Realism in the Post-Postmodern Age,” \*American Literary History\* 27, no. 1 \(2015\): 79-101.](#)

<sup>307</sup> Ibid.

“entrepreneurial posture” that, she argues, explains the new emphasis on the personal in fiction and poetry.<sup>308</sup>

Greenwald-Smith does important work in situating this aesthetic mode historically. But where she argues for an allegorical relationship between the forms of neoliberalism and the forms of contemporary literature, I am more interested in how the institutions of the neoliberal state exert force on literary production, circulation, and reception.<sup>309</sup> To that end, I want to focus on Greenwald-Smith’s parenthetical reference to de-funded arts agencies. As the previous chapter demonstrated, the NEA has been subjected to budget cuts and to threatened budget cuts ever since Reagan took office. This financial constraint forces the writers and the agency both to depend more on the market that neoliberalism champions. These days, the NEA most often chooses writers who have already met with some market success and who will, most likely, continue to do so. Examining the list of winners since 1985, we find mostly writers who marry modernist (or postmodernist) difficulty and accessible literary realism. These writers include Julia Alvarez (1987), Cristina Garcia (2004), Michael Cunningham (1988), Jennifer Egan (1991), Jeffrey Eugenides (1995), Jonathan Franzen (2002), Lorrie Moore (1989), Jane Smiley (1987), and David Foster Wallace (1989). Their work riffs on traditional realism while maintaining a sociohistorical orientation, telling us something about the way we live now. Franzen, who won his grant after publishing his prize-winning and best-selling novel *The Corrections* (2001), mixes references to Baudrillard and words like “diurnality” and “antipodes” into a story of a standard Midwestern family. Egan pushes formal innovation a step further, interrupting a nostalgia-laced narrative of the music industry of the 1980s with a Power Point

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<sup>308</sup> Greenwald-Smith.

<sup>309</sup> For more on the history of neoliberalism, see David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

presentation. The Power Point recalls the Mobius strip of John Barth's *Lost In the Funhouse*, a work of high postmodernism, but elsewhere, Egan's dialogue and narrative detail are more traditionally realist. Though they innovate in different ways, none of these writers ever transforms his or her fiction into a niche or unmarketable product.

These formal compromises have political analogues. The fiction writers selected by the grant committee often offer critiques of the state's policies—foreign policy, for example—but they rarely push these critiques beyond the point of possible consensus. In *The Corrections*, Franzen offers a critique of global capitalism through the figure of Chip, the middle child of the Lambert family. Chip is a professor of “Textual Artifacts” at a small liberal arts college near New York City. His cultural studies course “Consuming Narratives” ends poorly when his students fail to advance an obvious critique of an emotionally-manipulative advertisement. Worse, his smartest and most incisive student attacks the very premise of critical theory. She calls it “bullshit”; Chip offers Baudrillard in defense.<sup>310</sup> But the student will not be swayed. “Here things are getting better and better for women and people of color,” she retorts, “and gay men and lesbians, more and more integrated and open, and all you can think about is some stupid, lame problem with signifiers and signifieds.”<sup>311</sup> Here, Franzen equivocates, presenting a possible critique as a debate between “angry equal[s],” each of whom makes a strong case.<sup>312</sup> In this way, his fiction appeals to readers across the political spectrum, those who think “things are getting better” and those who, in the student's parodic words, think that “there's something

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<sup>310</sup> Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 44.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid.

<sup>312</sup> Franzen, *The Corrections*, 42.

wrong with everything[.]”<sup>313</sup> Chip ends up going back on his words: after embarking on a disastrous romance and losing his job, he becomes involved in a Lithuanian fraud operation that pushes the idea of the corporate state to its logical extreme. The fact that Chip manages to extricate himself and return home just in time for Christmas does not mean a return to his critical theory roots, but it does mean he recognizes the unsustainability of the capitalist enterprise. In this way, the novel vacillates back and forth between opposing political positions, aligning first with the critics and then with the corporations, and then again with the critics, *ad infinitum*. Its compromise, then, does not resolve conflict—to the contrary, political conflict is staged in the classroom scene and throughout the pages that follow—but it does suggest a savvy ambivalence, a way of challenging the status quo without arguing that it be overthrown.<sup>314</sup>

Similarly, Jennifer Egan’s Pulitzer-winning novel, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), presents a problem familiar to contemporary readers (especially readers of William Gibson’s 2003 novel *Pattern Recognition*): how to engage with grassroots marketing campaigns. Alex, a sound mixer looking for gainful employment, takes up the marketing campaign of the former record mogul Bennie Salazar. He learns marketing lingo and brainstorms lists of friends, sorted by need and corruptibility, who might help him spread the word about a children’s musician whose songs can, in this imagined future, be downloaded by toddlers themselves. “I know you’d

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<sup>313</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>314</sup> Franzen’s statements about writing for an open-minded, educated, but essentially average reader suggest that he is indeed trying to reach the largest audience possible. In this way, he extends Bobbie Ann Mason’s attempt to reach the people of her Kentucky hometown, explored in Chapter Four. For Franzen’s remarks on audience, see Jonathan Franzen, “Mr. Difficult,” *New Yorker* 30 September 2002: 100-109; Franzen, “Perchance to Dream: In the Age of Images, a Reason to Write Novels,” *Harper’s* April 1996: 35-54; and Seth Studer and Ichiro Takayoshi, “Franzen and the Open-Minded but Essentially Untrained Fiction Reader,” *Post45: Peer-Reviewed*, July 8, 2013, <http://post45.research.yale.edu/2013/07/franzen-and-the-open-minded-but-essentially-untrained-fiction-reader/>.



rather mix,” Bennie acknowledges during their first meeting. “The problem is [...] it’s not about sound anymore. It’s not about *music*. It’s about reach.”<sup>315</sup> These lines offer an evident reflection on the production of literature in the digital age. (This is an ongoing concern of Egan’s: in 2012, *The New Yorker* published one of Egan’s stories in a series of tweets.<sup>316</sup>) This concluding episode raises two questions. Is literature, or any form of art, compromised by marketing? Does marketing make art complicit with the forces of economic inequality? The novel seems to answer in the negative: the penultimate scene is a joyous open-air concert. The marketing campaign is a success, and the young families listening are soothed and entertained. The only suggestion that anything is amiss is a quick backward glance Alex offers on the novel’s final page, when he remembers “his young self, full of schemes and high standards, with nothing decided yet.”<sup>317</sup> It is yet another nostalgic moment in a novel full of them. The changes that have taken place between then and now are not celebrated, but neither are they presented as contingent. Such mourning makes “selling out” seem inevitable.<sup>318</sup>

In sum, for Franzen, Egan, Davis, and their contemporaries, an NEA grant marks their success in negotiating the dual pressures of aesthetic innovation and popular taste as well as their adept ability to appeal to audiences with divergent politics. This shows a change from the way grants operated in previous years. For the early beneficiaries of Ellison’s era, a government grant served as the corrective to the marketplace. It gave the writer what Olsen called “economic

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<sup>315</sup> Jennifer Egan, *A Visit From the Goon Squad* (New York: Knopf, 2010), 253.

<sup>316</sup> Jennifer Egan, “Black Box,” *The New Yorker*  
<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/06/04/black-box-2>.

<sup>317</sup> Egan, *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, 274.

<sup>318</sup> The idea of “selling out” is one of the novel’s major thematic concerns. “You think it’s selling out,” Bennie says to Alex when he offer him the marketing campaign. “Compromising the ideals that make you, ‘you.’” Egan, *A Visit From the Good Squad*, 252.

freedom,” and, consequently, aesthetic freedom as well. For Mason and the 1980s minimalists, the privilege of public funding carried with it the writer’s responsibility to respond to public taste. The federal grant had to be repaid—the writer had to give back to the reading community through her actions as well as through her art. In Mason’s hands, an NEA grant seems more like an advance against royalties, an investment with guaranteed returns. Today, though, the NEA grants looks more like a literary prize, just one of the many prizes that these state-funded writers win. It is a reward for work already produced and an encouragement to continue in the same vein.

If the history is any guide, though, this compromise will not last for long. Aesthetic evolution and political revolution remain on the horizon, and the NEA, charged with being relevant to artists and audiences both, will have to adjust its judgments if it wants to stay on the aesthetic cutting-edge without, as Heston put it, “getting nicked.” How will fiction writers respond to the political upheavals of our contemporary moment, to Occupy Wall Street or to the protests against police brutality? What aesthetic forms will be made or remade to reflect these events? And how will the state reward them, if it chooses to reward them at all? Some of these changes may already be afoot. Take, for instance, the work of Jesse Ball, a winner of a 2014 NEA grant (the most recent year for which fiction grants were awarded).<sup>319</sup> Ball, who teaches a course on lucid dreaming at the School of the Art Institute of the Chicago, writes elegant dystopian tales, metafictional fables that explore the malaise of our contemporary moment. His most recent book, *Silence Once Begun* (2013), is a novel about the price of revolutionary politics, told largely through a series interview transcripts. James Wood, reviewing the novel for

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<sup>319</sup> For a full list of the 2014 winners, see *The National Endowment for the Arts*, “Literature Fellowships – 2014,” [http://arts.gov/literature-fellowships-list/by-year/2014?litfellows\\_type=1](http://arts.gov/literature-fellowships-list/by-year/2014?litfellows_type=1) (accessed 28 April 2015).

the *New Yorker*, compared Ball, whom he called an “experimental writer,” to Paul Auster. He praised Ball’s adaptation of the “familiar postmodern quiz-kit.”<sup>320</sup> Ball is not the only experimental writer to win a recent award; Ben Marcus, for instance, won a grant in 2000. Nonetheless, Ball’s award may bespeak a new direction in state-funded fiction. If nothing else, it represents the enduring presence of an institution that has been valuable for writers and readers alike.

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<sup>320</sup> James Wood, “But He Confessed,” *New Yorker*, February 10, 2013, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/02/10/but-he-confessed>.

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